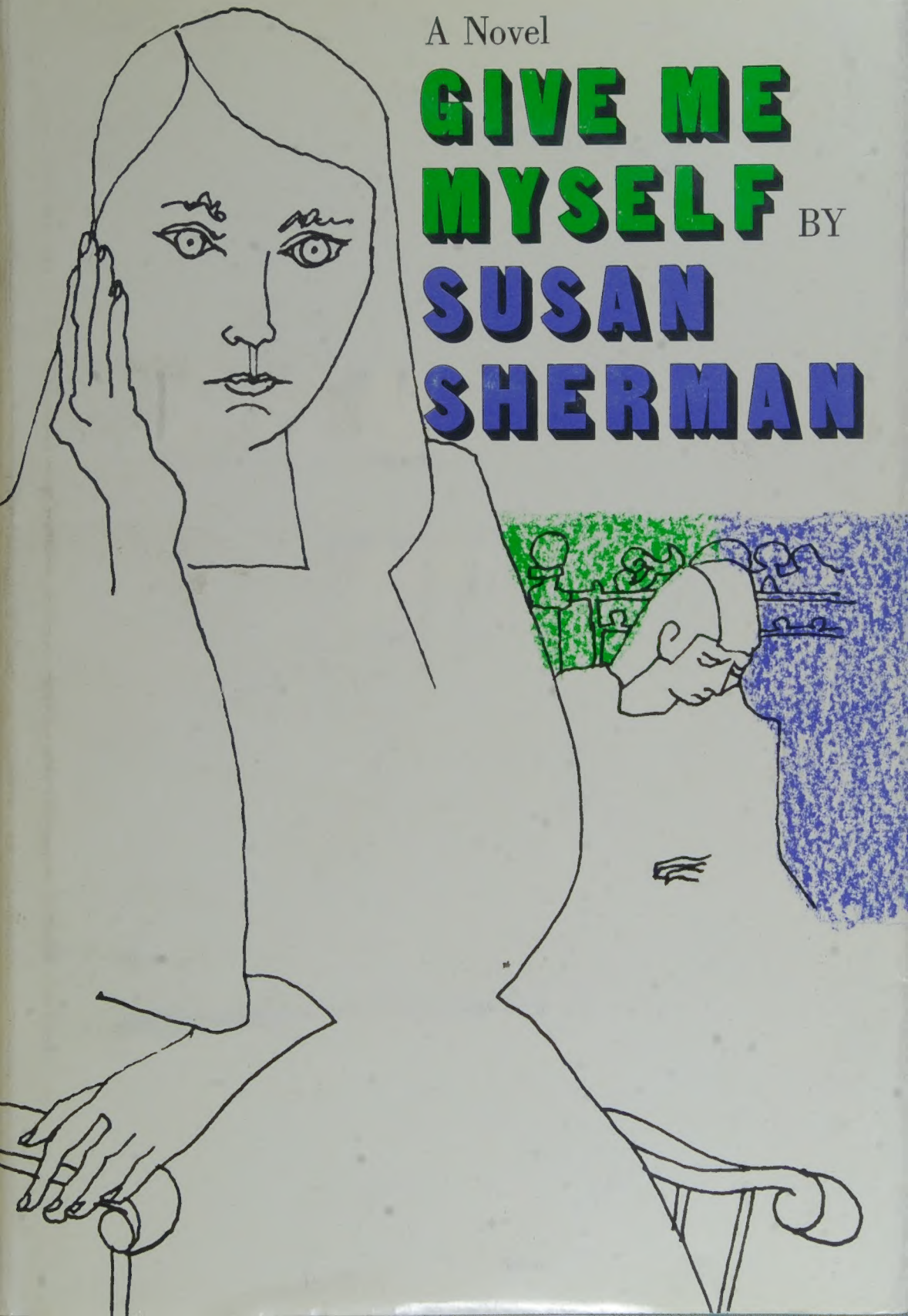
A Novel

GIVE ME MYSELF

BY

SUSAN SHERMAN



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(continued on back flap)

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CLEVELAND AND NEW YORK

GIVE ME MYSELF

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TITLE GIVE ME MYSELF

AUTHOR Susan Sherman

PUBLICATION DATE Feb. 27, 1961

PRICE $3.75

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The World Publishing Company
2231 WEST 110TH STREET · CLEVELAND 2 · OHIO

GIVE ME MYSELF

Give Me my Selfe, and take your Selfe again,
Devise some meanes, but how I may forsake You,
So much is Mine, that doth with You remaine,
That taking what is Mine, with Me I take You;
You doe bewitch Me, O that I could flie,
From my Selfe You, or from your owne Selfe I.

—Michael Drayton (1563–1631) from *Idea*

Susan Sherman

GIVE

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ME MYSELF

Published by The World Publishing Company
2231 West 110th Street, Cleveland 2, Ohio

Published simultaneously in Canada by
Nelson, Foster & Scott Ltd.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 61-6647
First Edition

WP 1260
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With all my love to my

Mother and Father

The author wishes to express her deep gratitude to Spencer Brown and Elbert Lenrow who taught her how to read and therefore, in large measure, to write; to Oliver G. Swan and Paul R. Reynolds for their patient understanding and kind co-operation while she was writing this book; but her deepest gratitude of all is to the Fourth of October, for on that day was born a soul which infused her mind and heart with its own penetrating awareness of the beautiful and significant, a soul of such infinite beauty and spirituality, such strength, Platonic purity, and immense genius that none but a fool would presume to understand it.

All persons and situations in this book
are fictional, and any resemblance to actual
persons or occurrences is coincidental.

GIVE ME MYSELF

I mean it was damn hot, usually over 100, and people were always running in off the streets to the air-conditioned cafeterias or to the old bookstores which were kept dark for the benefit of the old bindings and were pretty cool, although too musty for any real comfort. I used to wish I could rip my dresses off, they seemed so stifling. It certainly *was* hot that summer, but the heat was so confused in my mind with the excitement and stimulation and crazy-wonderful times that I was having in Middleton that I could never decide whether the heat was causing all the summer's wonders and whether I was supposed to love it because of that, or whether it actually had nothing to do with Masefield College and Middleton at all. No, it couldn't have been that. There would have been no lying along the banks of the James reading poetry for hours in the sun, or middle-of-the-night dips in Winslow Lake, if it hadn't been hot. There would have been none of that intimate and casual atmosphere which the bicycles and motor scooters gave to the little city by helping to bring strangers together simply because it *was* hot, because it was Middleton, and because it was Masefield, since for two months, at least, everyone had that much in common.

But that wasn't all by any means. There was a great deal more that I found at Masefield that summer which had nothing whatsoever to do with the heat, which could have been there in any season, and perhaps in any college, but it had to be looked for and found and the heat had absolutely no connection with it. I say it could perhaps have been found in any college, but I don't think I really believe that myself. It was Masefield: it wasn't any other college. It was those enormous steps to the doors of Dillingworth Library, it was those bumpy brick sidewalks along the Avenue, it was the great halls, the great museums, the great Tradition that romanticized the whole experience for me and entranced me, making me vulnerable for much, so much.

From the very first day of frantic shopping and getting acquainted with the place I was always conscious of its being Masefield, and once classes started I strongly believed that lectures like those could be heard nowhere else on earth. All my lectures were thrilling and exciting, partly because the professors were good and partly because they were at Masefield, but one class particularly was more than I had ever expected a class to be, and from that very first day it had an almost hypnotic effect upon me.

I hadn't really expected much. I knew that the professor was a great Irish scholar and critic who had been invited to teach at Masefield for a year which was to end this summer, and that was really why I had taken the course; I had heard about her criticism, which was widely acclaimed and respected, but all the same I was not particularly expecting her to be a good lecturer. Usually the greatest minds make the most boring deliveries. But I was surprised. Surprised really isn't the word for it, because surprises usually last a moment or so and then become accepted, and the initial reaction vanishes and is soon forgotten. No, I was not surprised. Perhaps stunned, and each lecture seemed to stun me more and more. It wasn't something that one could simply get used to.

That first lecture. . . . I arrived with a great mob and was pushed into some seat in the middle of an enormous auditorium. Being nearsighted, I could only see a somewhat blurred, gracefully tall, youthful, dark-haired woman standing on the platform, features indistinct, seemingly observing the attendance. I immediately took her to be a graduate student who was taking a rough count of the students to give to Mrs. McKenna before she was to mount the podium. That great scholar, poor thing, must be a pretty old woman by now to have assimilated all that vast knowledge, probably over seventy or so, and this girl, perhaps her assistant, was taking count of the students so that the shock of seeing such a packed hall wouldn't upset or surprise the old woman. Or perhaps her voice was hoarse by now and weakened with age and she wanted a limited enrollment, or perhaps—but I was beginning to tire of fantasizing and became anxious to see the McKenna woman and anxious for this dark-haired girl to get finished counting or whatever she was doing and give the floor to the professor.

But she stayed there and kept looking about. Now she seemed to be looking for Mrs. McKenna. The poor woman was probably having trouble on the stairs, so I turned around to help look for the gray-haired, large, masculine, academic type that I had imagined when suddenly from behind me—for I had completely turned about by now and was watching the rear door with anxious expectancy —I heard a sweetly modulated and lively voice say brightly, "I am Evelyn Gordon McKenna and this is The Principles of Literary Symbolism . . . course," but I didn't hear that last word because I had turned around so quickly in my

seat that all the papers and books had tumbled to the floor, making a loud and echoing crash. So *she* was Evelyn Gordon McKenna. Why, she must be fresh out of graduate school. And that could well have been possible if the lectures had been ordinary lectures. But they weren't. Suddenly an avalanche of sparkling, extemporaneous and brilliant speech came tumbling, literally tumbling, out of her mouth.

I was too stunned and fascinated to get it all, and furthermore I didn't understand a lot of what she was saying anyway, but whether it was that, I mean whether it was because I wasn't familiar with her terms or whether it was that I was stunned and fascinated by her rich, flowing Irish voice, I could only hear phrases, words. Not sentences or ideas, only single expressions and vocal inflections.

"Since our approach to poetry this summer is going to be mainly in terms of symbol, myth, and metaphor, I think it a good idea if I speak to you today in general terms about archetypal symbolism. These archetypal symbols are essentially communicable symbols," she said, and throwing her long, thin arms above her head added, "innumerable symbols are *not* communicable, you know. But archetypal symbols, so strongly prevalent in poetry, are important because associations are shared universally by the nature of human existence."

She said this was predominantly because certain poets had opened themselves up much more to spontaneity of feeling and intuition than their great predecessors had, and then she said something about universal images arising from the kind of state the poets allowed themselves

to be in while writing, but I really didn't get the connection between the symbols they used and the moods they were in.

"The neoclassical theory of the use of the image in poetry is that imagery, very attractive to the sense impressions, is a kind of decoration. What is substantial in poetry is the idea."

Again her arms were thrown up high, and my mind was distracted to thoughts of her arms, her showmanship, and for some reason I even drifted into thoughts about her moods—what they must be like and when she must have them.

". . . so you offer the reader good sense and . . ."

She was a superb actress, and I wondered if she had ever acted and, if she had, what roles. She would have been a perfect Lady Macbeth or . . .

". . . stick around it imagery."

I was abruptly shaken out of my daydreaming by "stick." I looked at her carefully and heard her saying something about imagery being "the primary substance of communication," and couldn't imagine the same woman who had just said *that* using the word "stick." So I just stared at her and wondered some more—especially about how a Masefield professor and Irish critic could really use a word like "stick." I mean that was the kind of word I would use, or perhaps even Ellen who was sitting next to me, but not Mrs. McKenna, not Evelyn Gordon McKenna.

"Feeling ceases its impact before the reason does. Since these poets have turned toward instinctive feeling, imagination, vision, and spontaneity as the sources of cognitive truth rather than reason acting alone, those images to which one

responds understandingly in terms of feeling are really the primary substance of the communication."

Most of that I had gotten by leaning over Ellen's arm and scanning her notebook, because I couldn't listen to what Mrs. McKenna was saying if I watched her, and I found it almost impossible not to watch her. I guess Ellen had noticed my daydreaming. My pencil had been lying idle on my notebook, and she had tapped me and pointed to her notes. I mechanically read them, failing to see the importance Ellen had attached to them by her expression and her pointing finger, which she was tapping furiously on the page. I was only reading words. I was still watching the woman and wondering—I don't really know exactly what I was wondering about, too many things I guess to be conscious of, but just wondering, very long and very hard.

I heard clamoring and rustling and realized, as if I hadn't been there at all, that the lecture was over, and for a quick second I wished that it would begin again and promised (whoever was listening to my thoughts) that I wouldn't daydream this time, that I would really take notes and listen. But the clamoring continued and my thoughts were lost in the hustle.

I left my books and papers on the floor because I had no lap to put them on now, for I was just about balancing on the edge of my seat with my legs straight back under my chair and my arms stretched all the way over the arms of the chair in front of me, which was conveniently empty. It was a kind of horizontal diving pose from which I could not, or did not want to, free myself until the very last word of hers had finished bouncing from wall to wall and

until the last student had left the hall. I just stayed. Some boy stayed too to ask her something, and they walked to the back door together down the aisle near me, so I saw her. I mean I really *saw* her. She was walking and talking like anyone else. I looked as carefully as I could without seeming vulgarly curious and saw that she wasn't as young as she had appeared at a distance, but she was still far, far younger than I had expected.

She looked like an old thirty-five. I mean you wouldn't say that she was fifty and looked young. It was obvious that she was much younger than that, but you felt sorry when you saw her, sorry that she looked so old for such a young woman. Her long, thin body was youthful and shapely without the usual veins that show on the arms and legs of women in their fifties, but somehow her neck and face were those of a woman at least in her fifties. It was as though she had exchanged heads with someone much older but had retained her own body. The neck was drawn and extremely thin, making the veins and bones protrude very noticeably. But I attributed this phenomenon to her enormous sensitivity and the inevitable strains and sufferings of a person of those sensibilities. In the days and lectures that followed I could never get over the incompatibility in my mind between her apparent youth and femininity and her overwhelming and awesome genius.

My days soon began to revolve around this class, and I worked for it day and night and awaited it all morning. When the hour of its meeting came around I would run all the way over to the large, magnificent hall in the art museum which added a certain degree of solemnity to the lectures, and would hustle to get a seat in the front row

from where I could watch this woman's dramatics, which she used with great facility to emphasize the lectures and the poetry readings.

I soon forgot that I was at Masefield. I mean I knew I was there, but it seemed as though I had always been there. I had found something to love, I had a place now and I belonged, and anyway I was busy. Time was such a beautiful, precious thing in Middleton. Each minute a reading minute, a learning minute, a minute closer to being like Mrs. McKenna. And then New York, I'd think of New York. Time at home was just time. If I read there, or at school, nobody really cared, and it had always seemed as though I didn't know any more. But here during this hot, hot summer, I was *knowing* more every minute, and every minute I felt happier and stronger than the minute before. And while I was feeling like that sometimes I'd think of my father, think of him as being almost supernatural. I mean his sending me here. Somehow I liked to think that even though he had never been to Masefield he knew exactly the happiness I was deriving from my courses, from meeting new friends, and from really learning. Actually I knew he couldn't possibly know about Mrs. McKenna, because he'd never let himself feel like that about anybody, so he wouldn't be able to recognize the feeling in me—but I only thought that way sometimes. Most of the time I credited him with not only sending me here so I could have things and feelings he had never had, but because he knew precisely what those things and feelings would be. The exaltation of walking on the Avenue and passing Rilke's, with an 1851 first edition of *Moby-Dick* in the window, or going through the

floors and floors of stacks in Dillingworth, or of hearing the lectures, all of them . . . or even Mrs. McKenna. That's the way I would have liked it—for him really to have known everything, but even though he didn't, I was still enormously grateful for his having let me come up.

A week or so after classes started I became conscious of a marvelous feeling of happiness about everything I was doing. Thinking about it, I realized that surely the basis of all this happiness and expansion of my mind and thoughts was due totally to Mrs. McKenna and her dynamic and brilliant lectures. I was not the only one who felt so positively about the course, for the campus was always buzzing with excited students who had perhaps sat in on McKenna's lectures for the first time that day or who were agog about her and trying furiously to recruit their friends to audit the class. Knowing what this class was doing to me, and thinking that it might be pleasing to her to learn how deeply her lectures were affecting a student, I decided to go to Mrs. McKenna's office and tell her directly how I felt. But there would be so many complications.

Although I was glad I wasn't a credit student in the course, so that she would not think I was trying to gain favor, still, there was some rule that noncredit students were not allowed to speak in class or in any way to take up the time of a professor. I waited several days, deciding whether or not I should dare and, if I *did* dare, what I would say, what I would wear, what books I would be carrying under my arm, and a whole lot of other miscellaneous considerations which consumed me until finally, one day, I did dare.

It was a particularly sweltering day and I had decided when I got up that morning that although I had planned on this day I would have to put it off. The heat for one thing was discouraging and besides, I wasn't up to it. But it was during Italian while the professor was talking about the *dolce far niente* atmosphere in Italy that I decided that my philosophy was to be *dolce far molto*, for the days were passing quickly and soon, perhaps too soon, it would be too late to do anything. As soon as he said "*dolce far niente*" the words entered my mind like a strong beam of light, a powerful arrow, lifting the lid off the brewing pot and letting out the whirlwind of thought. I jumped up and ran out, books and all, ran across the campus, ran to her office and stopped for a moment on the porch of the building. Looking around, I saw students lying beneath the trees talking. Under one of the trees was a boy from my Chaucer class, Bob, who smiled and, waving, beckoned me to join him. I had wanted to talk to him since the very first day of class. But somehow just at that moment I couldn't remember more than just vaguely how much I had wanted him to notice me. Somehow I didn't have that need, whatever it had been, to attract him and speak with him just now. I suppose then I realized that I hadn't really wanted him very

badly to begin with, perhaps just for some talking that I was lonely for or for that male recognition that I never tired of. But just now, as I stood on the porch and saw him calling me and waved back to him, I didn't feel glad. I mean I was glad that he finally recognized me and wanted to speak with me but that didn't make me glad, because I had an enormous need just then for something very different, and until that need was satisfied I couldn't possibly have been glad about anything.

I ran up the stairs two at a time and then, then I just stopped short in front of her door. It was open and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't just walk in, and besides I was so shocked to see her sitting there, since one of the reasons I had had the strength to go up, to run all the way, was because somehow I knew that this was not her official office hour and she really was not going to be there. But the reality of her presence shocked me into silence and I stood looking at her as at a mirage.

"Come in," she said in that deep, beautiful Irish voice. "Come in and sit down." I smiled mechanically and felt my limbs contract so that to sit down took the actual physical effort of unlocking my muscles and bending them and finally managing to simulate a sitting position, although actually I was leaning on the edge of the chair and shaking too much to hold on to the arms.

"Mrs. McKenna, I don't know if you recognize me," I said, at which she smiled amiably and my heart sank, for she had obviously never set eyes on me before but was kind enough to simply acknowledge my presence at the time, "but I'm in your symbolism course and I sit in the first row and I, well, this is hard for me to tell you honestly

because I want it to sound sincere, but I just wanted to tell you that I've never been so utterly thrilled with a course. You've really changed my whole way of thinking. I have never been as happy as I am this summer and I know it's all because of your lectures and your beautiful, simply beautiful poetry readings. I . . ."

"But that's very sweet of you to tell me," she interrupted. "You know a teacher doesn't ever really know what she's getting across if she isn't told." Her smile and the gentleness and warmth of her answer unfroze my thoughts, and soon I was saying what I had meant to say all along and I began to forget the lines I had memorized, to forget that I was giving a performance.

"You know, Mrs. McKenna, I've read just about every marginal reference you've made. I . . . I didn't mean to say that in terms of myself, but it's because of the exciting approach you take to the poets and the whole idea of symbols and the dramatic and rich way you present them. I had never heard of this approach to symbolism before, and I am so thrilled to be able to study at my own pace and not have to worry about being tested on it all. Just to be able to go off on whatever aspect of your lecture interested me most that day."

"You mean you're not taking the course for credit?" She asked it with sincere amazement, which pleased me, for I felt I had impressed her in some small way.

"No, I have to take a year of Italian for my language requirements and that's all the credits you're allowed to carry, but I had read about you and heard about you from students who had been enormously inspired by your teaching and criticism. You know, I've gone over to Sutton

Hall and listened to the recordings there of some of the poetry you've read and *really*, they are so poor in comparison to your readings."

"Is that true?" she asked with all frankness, but I, sure that people came to her office every day telling her stuff like this, felt it was all just a series of amenities.

"So I was wondering, Mrs. McKenna, and please just say no if you want to because I know many professors who wouldn't like this, but I was just wondering, if I could possibly get my hands on a tape recorder, since I sit in the first row and there's a plug right there, if you would mind if I recorded your lectures, especially the ones in which you read poetry," after which I let out all the breath I had been holding in for the past some-odd minutes and waited nervously for what I was sure would be a painfully kind refusal.

"I certainly would not mind. As a matter of fact, I had asked the college to have the lectures recorded, but all the recorders had been reserved, believe it or not."

"You mean you'd like copies of the tapes?" I asked hopefully, spontaneously fantasizing some sort of personal relationship evolving from the contact.

"Well, yes," she said modestly. "I'll be leaving for Europe right after the summer session, but I have a son in New York who can have the tapes re-recorded. You can look Steven up when you get to New York."

But I didn't want her son, or did I? Supposing she went off to Europe and forgot all about me, for there really was no reason why I should be particularly remembered, and while she was there Steven McKenna would write to his mother about having met some Nona someone-or-other who

had some of her tapes, and that he was in love with her, and then Mrs. McKenna would be my mother-in-law and then she'd be mine by *right* to talk to, to question, to listen to endlessly. But then again the relationship would ruin all the spontaneity of love which is such fun to give and to develop. Then she'd be "our responsibility" and kindnesses would be expected and become habitual, with Christmas-giving stuff and birthdays. And if Steve and I were to someday sit in on one of her lectures we'd have to tell her it was wonderful, and if we didn't, well, we'd just *have* to. Then I remembered that I wasn't married to Steve and for the time being at least I had the chance to tell Mrs. McKenna what I felt spontaneously and without motive or obligation. So while the situation still retained this warm and complimentary tone I went on some more about the spirituality and creativeness which I was deriving from her philosophy and how boundlessly grateful I was to her. But when I found myself repeating it all for the third time I used my Italian class as an excuse to leave and started to walk out in a trance, much as I had walked in, and just as I was about to close her door she said, "By the way, what's your name?" Thinking this just another amenity and positive that she'd never in the world remember it I was tempted to reply with some old Victorian name, one which she'd associate with a favorite poem and then confuse me with the poem and I'd become "poetic"—but without thinking I felt my mouth moving and heard myself say, "Nona, Nona Greene. Well, good-by, Mrs. McKenna, and thank you so much."

"Thank *you*, Nona." And that was all.

Her lecture that morning was particularly marvelous. I don't know whether it was because it was *really* marvelous or whether it was because now that I knew her and had actually spoken with her the lectures would always be more marvelous simply because of that. But I'm sure it wasn't just that. It couldn't have been. I'm sure that even if I had been a symbolist I still would have thought it was marvelous. I mean that if I had really understood what she was saying, as I assumed everyone else in the whole lecture hall did except me, I would still have felt she was terrific. So I just sat there, staring, almost too engrossed to take any notes and thinking how utterly brilliant of her to have read all those things and how brilliant of her to be able to tie everything together and make such intelligible sense out of all that material. Sometimes I'd think so deeply about how brilliant she was and when she could possibly have read all those books and what must she have looked like when she was a student going to lectures and why did she so love the poems she did. Perhaps it was because . . . and on and on like that, that frequently I'd lose what she was saying. But then I tried to listen because I realized that once it was said it was said and it wouldn't be said again, it would be lost, most probably forever, if

I didn't make a very strong and great attempt to listen to what she was saying and to stop this distracting day-dreaming.

"The romatic hero is a rather specialized type which we find particularly in Byron. A version of it is in Shelley, and we see it in the French symbolists. It is an archetype. A version of it is in Emily Brontë's Heathcliff. For this hero type we can use the period name 'tam,' the dandy. This word has become old-fashioned for it has different associations. He is the outlaw, he is Ishmael, the outsider. 'Dandy' itself one feels one can use because Baudelaire adopts this English word in his prose descriptions of the modern hero of his times. From the point of view of the bourgeoisie he is a wild figure, guilty of every excess and taboo-breaking, a 'fastidious aesthetic' who despises the bourgeoisie. We have spoken of Byron himself and his conflict with his glandular tendency to obesity. Byronic clothes were widely adopted during the century even up to Disraeli, the flowing cravats and the open white shirts which one associates with Poe and Disraeli. The horror of the bourgeoisie on the part of the dandy may be associated with the ordinary bourgeois practice of devotion of the family circle in eating meals, consuming. It is a satisfaction of carnal appetites that goes against the asceticism of the poetic modée, the dandy. The attitude toward sex by the middle class has horror for the ascetics as sheer routineness of the carnal engagements, when people roll over each other in bed, along with the great attention to one's insides, bowels, etc."

Next to me Ellen was squirming.

"Isn't it marvelous, Ellen?" She squirmed some more.

"With the neuroses of the First World War, shell-shocked men tended to be cardiac. Today it is ulcers, spastic colitis, and so forth. Doctors say that the parents of the men in the First World War were heart-conscious. Woman is the opposite of the dandy and therefore she should inspire. Woman is natural, that is to say, abominable. But as Baudelaire says, the more a man cultivates the arts the less he fornicates. But the significance to my mind is in that there are so many homosexuals in the fields of the arts. The bondage of the bourgeois routine enters into the syndrome along with the asceticism of male friend-ships."

Ellen's squirming was beginning to distract me. "It's so inaccurate, Nona," she breathed into my ear. "She just isn't making any sense. I wish she'd stop being so general and get more specific."

I was annoyed at her disrespectfulness and hurt by her criticism. I shifted my weight to the other side, getting my head away from hers.

"In Gide's Corydon *the female body is horribly ugly. Gide is quite a symbolic case in point. He loved his wife, but wouldn't dream of sex with her."*

Ellen wrote in my notebook, "Why is she hammering on homosexuality this way?"

"I don't know. I think she's wonderful," I wrote back.

"He completely divorced sex from life. He made a philosophical point of it, as Byron did. Friendship and sex just simply don't go together.

"To relate this to the Ishmael archetype, let us look at Ishmael in the Bible. Abraham married Sarah and she was barren. Then Sarah advised Abraham to have a child by

her own handmaiden. The natural result—Bible stories are marvelous in rendering human nature—Sarah is jealous. She worked on Abraham to dispossess them, to send them out. When she was ninety, angels told Sarah . . ."

"Oh, Jesus," Ellen interrupted again, this time more loudly and with much more disgust. "She's just talking gibberish."

"*. . . who symbolizes nomadic tribes.*"

Ellen tapped her pencil irritably against her notebook. "There's no beginning or middle or end to what she's saying. It's all middle."

"Shhhh . . ."

"*Fragments of his personality correlate with mythological traits of ancient archaic mythological heroes. To contrive a formulation I'm going to use Ishmael for an archetype here and use the literal references back to the Biblical Ishmael. In the first place, he is the firstborn and/or the only son and is conscious of his superior powers as such. Byron, no? Second, he has a grievance simply for some wrong for which he is not responsible. Ishmael was illegitimate. It wasn't his fault that he got born at all or that he got pushed into the desert. . . .*"

"It's not *your* fault, Mrs. McKenna, that you got born, is it? It's not *your* fault that you drink. . . ."

"*Ellen!*"

It had just been a nasty rumor. I had heard it for the first time a day or two earlier when I had asked someone why she didn't have tenure any place. It had just been an easy answer, just a rumor. I knew a scholar like Mrs. McKenna couldn't . . . dr . . . dr . . . *drink.*

"*Relating this to other nineteenth-century figures of the*

time, we have Byron's clubfoot and his tendency to obesity . . ."

Ellen nudged me with her elbow and whispered loudly, "What's Byron's obesity have to do with it? Let's talk about *Manfred* or *Cain* instead."

"She's getting to that, Ellen, just wait. God, this is great!"

"*. . . we have Poe, who was illegitimate and had a sorry family history and developed alcoholism, and his unfortunate love affair with his cousin, which was really incest to any nineteenth-century mind. And Coleridge. It wasn't his fault that he got the opium habit. It had been prescribed as medicine.*"

She was beautiful. She *couldn't* drink!

"*And Stendhal, who loathed his family, who had the Oedipus rebellion throughout him. And of course Hamlet, the first modern romantic hero of this kind. His father's murder, his mother's incestuous adultery, it's not his fault. It's not his fault that he can't have his rightful place on the throne.*

"*Then the Ishmael type is not like and does not like the fashionable, successful, etc. Sarah was successful. He despises them for not being as gifted as himself. They envy and persecute him for the same reason.*"

That's what Ellen was doing. She was just persecuting Mrs. McKenna because she was not poetic herself. That's what it must be.

"*. . . and as a result, he is a social outcast and not easily employable. If he falls in love he's unhappy, as Baudelaire, Poe, and Gide. He dwells in the wilderness. He prefers to hang around with other social outcasts, crooks, whores,*

sailors. W. H. Auden has pointed this out again and again. Ishmael and the nomads of the desert are the marijuana boys, jazz musicians, freight-car tramps. Prometheus is a social outcast from Olympian society. He associated with bad company, man. Christopher Marlowe is another example and Dostoevski and his gambling. And Bloom in Dublin.

"This is what makes an archetype, this reappearing from most ancient times to modern time, a primordial configuration for the psyche. Treatments of archetypes change with the epochs. In his solitude and low company Ishmael develops courage and endurance. Byron swam the Hellespont, and from tuberculosis Gide forced himself into a rigorous discipline by jumping into ice-cold lakes. He is unhappy and lonely and cherishes his unhappiness and loneliness as proof of his superiority."

Ellen looked at her watch, then shoved my arm. "This hammering upon the personalities of the artists instead of their works is very interesting, very interesting indeed," she whispered with smug complacency.

"... some kind of alienation, certainly not happiness, but clinging to that which differentiates.

"These patterns have their archaic parallels, the difficulty about the hero's birth. The great hero myth is the parable of illegitimacy or dispossession. Moses had dubious parentage. Freud's treatment of Moses in Moses and Monotheism *is most interesting. Freud believes that Moses was actually an Egyptian and that this is an archetypal story. Having become a leader he had to fit into the archetype and therefore was made to be of a Hebrew mother. At this period a new dynasty developed under a*

gifted Pharaoh who had adopted monotheism, and Moses must have been an Egyptian and here is where Hebrew monotheism derived. Arthur's parentage is dubious. Actually, all the way through is the aspect of the archaic hero myth."

I thought the lecture had been great. Anything which had seemed disjointed or irrelevant I attributed to my own gaps in knowledge and my own limitation of comprehension. I had never heard anything quite like that lecture and I was going to tell that to Ellen, especially since she had been complaining throughout. But she spoke first, before I had a chance, and even though I didn't agree with her and almost didn't want to listen, I never forgot what she said.

"God, Nona, that was by far one of the worst, most discombobulated lectures I have ever heard."

"Oh, Ellen, it was so good."

"Nona, illuminating Byron's sex life is *not good*. It is not good morally or any other way. If Byron had wanted to talk about it then Byron would have. I don't see that it illumines the least thing about his poetry. His sex life was his own business."

"Oh, Ellen, that's not the point at all. She wasn't trying to be immoral."

"Nona, I didn't say she was. Don't you see? Don't you see that Mrs. McKenna is identifying herself with these poets and artists and is justifying her own vices on this basis? Her whole lecture just seemed to me to be a huge rationalization, and Nona, it's a strange one. I can't think of a single major literary figure besides Proust and Gide and a couple of others who were homosexuals. Oh, they may have flirted with the idea, but Nona, this woman is

sex-obsessed. A number of minor poets are probably homosexual simply because they *are* minor. But there have been so many great, great artists who have been heterosexual, including the Florentines and Shakespeare. Excuse my sarcasm, Nona, but I just see the whole pattern of her lectures as an adroit cover-up for latent homosexual tendencies of her own."

I couldn't stand that. I couldn't stand it when students took it upon themselves to tear apart a professor, to say where he or she had been wrong. Somehow I felt Mrs. McKenna had a right to be wrong. Somehow I felt that that had been why Masefield had gotten her there. That somehow her wrongness, if of course she was wrong at all, was *brilliant* wrongness, important wrongness, and that it was part of the education of a good student to know and be aware of her wrongness.

Ellen could see that I was furious, and that mostly I was hurt, so we stopped talking about it. Besides, we both had to run off to other classes. But I couldn't forget what Ellen had said, and because of what she had said I began forcing myself to admire Mrs. McKenna all the more, to love and pity her, to consider her one of the great Ishmael archetypes and revere her almost religiously, and to praise her to everyone I'd meet. I would have wanted to anyway, I think, but now it was as though I had to, so for days I imagined as hard as I could what it would be like to go to her office and just talk. Not about anything, really. Not necessarily Gide or Byron or Poe, but just anything at all, or maybe nothing. Perhaps sharing silence for awhile would be beautiful. It was just being in proximity with that mind that meant so much. I used to wonder . . .

what if I were to pay her as one pays a tutor? Would she let me come in once a week and just sit and listen to her? In class she could take the most ordinary occurrence and turn it into a dynamic and dramatic image with a nature all its own, almost a living nature which one could never forget. And then there were her poetry readings. Perhaps I could listen to them for half an hour a week, even ten minutes or five.

But such thoughts were useless, and I would be shaken back to the realities of the situation when I'd see her the next day on that great platform in front of at least a hundred students and lecturing way above the heads of everyone, making us all want to read everything she mentioned or referred to so that perhaps by her next lecture we'd be that much closer to the workings of her mind. Not only was I sure that she had many more important things to do with her time than to carry on a monologue each week with a student, but I knew that I could never again muster up the courage to go back to her office unless—*unless* I could devise the most, the very most profound question in the world about the poetry, something that perhaps no one had ever before thought of. I couldn't imagine ever wasting one single minute of her time on something that wasn't utterly unique and brilliant. I often wondered about, but could never really imagine, the idea of her shopping at the grocer's, giving up that moment or two of thought that she could be spending on some aspect of the death wish in Keats to order some Tetley tea or Ronzoni spaghetti. I never really considered how she did eat, but if it involved this sort of waste of time I was sure she simply didn't.

Actually I knew nothing about her. Maybe she had a maid who did the marketing, or perhaps her husband took over that part of the home business. That very first day of class when she had said, "Parents should all bring their children up on the *Songs of Innocence*—I know, I'm one myself," realizing that she didn't mean that she was a child, I immediately pictured a white clapboard house on some side street in Middleton with a picket fence around it and a tall, very virile man lying in the hammock or perhaps cooking the dinner on the barbecue and the two little blond, sunburned kids sitting at Mrs. McKenna's feet listening to "Piping down the valleys wild" while they were waiting for their father to finish cooking the meat. But then she had told me she had a son in New York, and then I didn't know all over again. But the day she read "And I wrote my happy songs, Every child may joy to hear," and said, "and they certainly do," I was again sure that she must have some little kids. Perhaps the son in New York was from a former marriage, or simply much older than the others.

Each night I nervously tried to go to sleep and found the best way was by memorizing poetry and reciting it over and over again to myself until I just collapsed into slumber. Most of the poems I memorized were Blake's, and I would fall asleep wondering what he looked like . . . how he could write such sweet things . . . whether he looked like his Job . . . whether he looked like . . . looked like . . . and then I awoke and at the foot of my bed was a great white cloud on which Blake was standing looking just like Job with his long white beard flowing and his great powerful muscles visible and dynamic, but his

strength was peaceful and serene, and at his side, holding his hand, was my beautiful Evelyn McKenna wearing the olive-green tunic dress she had worn to her first lecture and her black hair almost golden with sunlight from behind, like the petals of Blake's Sunflower blowing gently about her head, entwined with the flowing beard. And just before they vanished, they held out their arms for me to join them.

Oh, how I wanted to share that vision with someone. I felt like running out into the street right then in my pajamas and stopping the first person who came along and shaking him and telling him, like the Ancient Mariner, what I had seen. But I didn't budge. I was paralyzed. It was much too sacred just then to share with anyone. Anyone, that is, except Mrs. McKenna. It had been just that morning, or the morning before, I wasn't sure which, that she had spoken to us about this vision business. "Blake believed that by denying the validity of the imagination and by elevating his reason to supreme levels of psychological dignity, man had divided himself from his true destiny. But through myth and legend," she had said, "we may retain evidence of what can be done. You make a strict dichotomy between the conscious and everything else, thus isolating yourself from any possibility of a valid, immediate relation with reality. The major point is that revelation never ceases. Man, in his true self, is apprehending always. Hence Blake can, with such profound conviction, know that his visions are truth. It's possible for you too, eh?"

Yes, it had been possible, and it would simply ruin it if I had to describe it now to someone who wouldn't

care or, worse, to someone who would say, "Now why do you suppose you had that fantasy? . . . What associations do you have with . . ." No, I could never have gone into all that, and besides, I didn't want to. I didn't care why. I just knew I had seen it and that I felt overwhelmed with joy.

I was still trying frantically to contrive a profound and involved question, and after nights of wakeful thinking and trying, trying much too hard, I finally fell back on some awfully trite thing about the mountains in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, something I had heard Ellen talking about. I tried to make it as complicated as possible so that she might not quite understand the question verbally, since I was quite sure that conceptually it would be a tragic disappointment. Why did I have to feel such a necessity for devising reasons for going to her office? It could all have been so simple, but it wasn't. It was Masefield, and it was hot, and she was the great scholar Evelyn Gordon McKenna and I was just little Nona, but mostly it was that heat, that intolerable heat.

But I did go to her again and I did ask her that contrived question and she did answer it, as well as a vague, nebulous question like that can be answered, and it was all over in less than two minutes. Oh, what a tragic mistake. Now she knew that I didn't really have anything on my mind and now we would have nothing to say . . . but we did, because she remembered my name, surprising me more than I could physically hide, and asked me where I went to college.

Sooner or later that was bound to come up. It was one of the big anxieties I carried with me all summer, for of course everyone at the summer school wants to know where you study during the winter, and most everybody answers Radcliffe, Wellesley, Smith, Vassar . . . and I wouldn't dare utter the name of my college but instead would say, "Oh, I'm in the process of transferring," which satisfied most of them, but sometimes they'd want to know from where to where and that became difficult. But when Mrs. McKenna asked me, although I was certainly tense and anxious and sorry, I knew that I would tell her the truth, and I did. I told her where I had started, to where I had transferred, and I even told her that I was utterly miserable and stuck there permanently because of the erratic A-F record, and that Masefield was the first place where I had really felt free and happy in the past few years, without the terror and feeling of inadequacy, but I knew myself that it was for as many years back as I could remember. I had only told one or two people about this before. Somehow people generally regard a record like that most unsympathetically and never offer suggestions or advice or even sympathize verbally. Sometimes you know they understand, but that doesn't matter at all and then you're sorry you told them. But I knew that Mrs. McKenna would understand the right way, and I knew I wouldn't be sorry I had told her. I somehow firmly knew it.

Actually, I don't know why I knew it, why I could attribute the human quality of sympathy to her when I really didn't regard her as very human at all. She was of the other world and couldn't possibly be concerned with worldly matters. Her black hair just happened to be curly

and combed each day, although I was positive she didn't know what a brush or a pincurl was. And that first day when I saw her take out a cigarette . . . "She smokes!" I exclaimed, much as I would if my car suddenly talked. "She *is* human, you know," a friend assured me. But I didn't know, at least not yet.

And then I discovered she lived in an apartment house and I looked at the switchboard in the lobby and saw "Mrs. E. G. McKenna." Then I knew. She didn't have a tall, virile husband or a picket fence and barbecue or two blond kids. So then I had to start new fantasies, because I knew she lived quite alone in that small apartment. The answer, I thought, was simply that she was too much the genius to live with anyone. Or maybe her husband had died and that explained her suffering, troubled face, *for it was the saddest face I had ever seen.* Sometimes now I can't remember what she looked like, but feature by feature that sorrowful expression comes back. The thin bottom lip and almost no upper lip drawn in a nervous, quivering slit across her face, and her little Irish nose and those eyes. I always knew that somehow those eyes had seen the sorrows of the world and perhaps something far worse than I could ever have imagined. And the way she walked wasn't human either. It was rather feline. She had an extraordinarily graceful poise and dignity which contrasted sharply with her many tense, almost fearful characteristics. I could never fit both of these sides of her together, but they were always there and always distinguishable.

But I felt she would understand and she did, saying something about these late adolescent years of a sensitive person's life being the most difficult of all, a period of

seeming chaos being almost inevitable because one's horizons are changing radically and swiftly and that at this time one does not have the adult shrewdness to cope practically with the tumult of inner change—and that was enough for me. Then I was sure that she was human.

It was like the first time I ever saw a hospital room. I wouldn't go near any of the patients, regarding them as strange embodiments of curious noises, illnesses, distortions, and odors. But when I heard them talk, everything changed. They were still strange in their whiteness and their smells but now they were human-strange, and that made a lot of difference. There was some rational basis now for their resembling human people. It wasn't just coincidence any more, because now I knew they really *were* people. So Mrs. McKenna became human for me then, too, because she could speak a language in which I had an inordinate need to be spoken to just then, and she had feelings for people, for live people, not just the people on the pages of her books.

And those great knotty pine bookcases in the office housing all those hundreds of books around her, and that pine smell that so often goes with books in private libraries—the pine smell and the view of the chapel spire from her office window—were working on me like a continuously droning noise that begins to sound like words, phrases, ideas. . . . I heard nothing except her voice, but the view of the campus was there and that unforgettable book smell and together they made me think . . . Masefield, Masefield, Masefield, as if I had been on a train and were interpreting the chugs as MASE-field, MASE-field, MASE-field. And somewhere between the view and the smell and the chugging of my thoughts I heard her tell me that she felt

I'd be eligible and successful in Swarthmore's honors program and said that she'd try to get me in there if I'd like her to, that if I wanted her to, she'd write to Swarthmore and see what they'd say.

The chugging stopped. The smell didn't seem to matter any more. I no longer saw the view of the campus. I only saw a chance to do something with myself, for myself and for her. I guess it was mostly for her. And I saw the big, fat, stolid face of the professor who had flunked me in English, who had thrown up his arms in desperation telling me I would never be anyone, never write, never graduate, never, never, never . . . and the nevers turned into evers and I told him I was going to Swarthmore and he decided he wanted me back in his department because he suddenly thought I'd be a great writer and he wanted to train me, and I laughed. But the pine smell came back and I was again paralyzed. Looking at her, I could only force a nervous smile and I tested my head to see if it would go up and down and, when I found that it would, I nodded, at first slowly, then again and again, faster and faster, bigger and bigger nods until I was able to really smile and then to laugh and then to take her by the hands, both hands, and thank her, and thank her, and thank her . . . and when I left the office I was on the ground and she was on the ground with me. No one was up-there-somewhere any longer, and I was happy.

All I had to do was go to the New School and get some A's and Swarthmore would consider me for the following fall. This is what they had replied to Mrs. McKenna's letter. This is what she told me they had said. They had said "we couldn't get a fairy princess in with a shoehorn" this coming semester, but "if this girl is what you say, and she can get some A's on her record at the New School this year, we'll consider her for next fall."

I wasn't disappointed. I mean I tried not to be but hell, I was suicidal. All those dreams about going to Swarthmore and surprising everyone, everyone who knew me. Surprising *me*. I had known all along that this Swarthmore thing was nothing to bank all my hopes on and I knew that I'd never tell anyone about it because it would only mean that much more embarrassment when I didn't get in.

I hadn't wanted to tell anyone and I had decided not to. But then there was Carl in Chicago. He'd understand. He'd understand that it was all indefinite, he'd be all right to tell. So I had written him a long letter all about Mrs. McKenna, all about Swarthmore, how by a snap of the fingers she was performing this miracle.

And Helen, I had to tell Helen. She was a part of me even though I sometimes hated her. She was about four

years older than I and lived next door. She had lived next door for as far back as I could remember, and we had grown up almost as sisters. Neither of us had any real sisters and we had tacitly adopted each other for better or worse. No matter how bad things got between us or how much we hated each other, neither would ever close the door completely. Even when we weren't speaking for weeks at a time we always knew that it was merely a-week-at-a-time thing, and if something exciting should happen to one of us during one of those weeks we'd just forget the whole argument and once again huddle in close secrecy over the latest events. But always, even during our good times, there were enormous undercurrents of jealousy and competition, and sometimes it seemed that we both actually tried to feed the jealousies, to let them grow. The jealousy on Helen's part seemed to have grown enormously since I had started college, because she had flunked out after her third year and had been being a secretary since. Sometimes I'd remember this and try not to tell her things that would antagonize her, but sometimes, like just now, I had such an enormous need for Helen, for a sister, that I forgot, or perhaps I didn't care, or perhaps I did, and I'd tell her everything.

Somehow I had thought she'd keep it to herself, and that was so important to me that I had forgotten everything else and had driven all the way to New York just to tell her about Swarthmore, and she had just sat there as if I had merely told her that I had bought a dozen eggs.

(But when I came home after the summer and had been forced to tell her the truth, she perked up, sat erect, asked to hear more, wanted the whole story with details included. But that was Helen's jealous, spiteful side, like the mob that

gathers around a street rumble or a fire or an accident, and she was the insurance company collecting the profit, the profit to her being the vicarious pleasure she sometimes seemed to derive from someone else's problems, but then I guess the real profit was the removal of the threat of competition. Competition was the wall that was between us, at least one of the many. She had laid the brick foundation long before I was old enough to know what it was all about and had had her four years' head start on it, and as soon as I knew what it meant I'd reach up and try to remove the top brick, but then she'd put two more in its place. So I began to play her game too, and the wall got higher and higher. I really don't know how it did, but somehow, despite the real love we had for each other, we were still able to add the bricks.)

Having to break the news to Carl and to the few others I had told wasn't nearly as bad as having to tell Helen, and Helen's reaction seemed to make it much easier to write back to Carl because I knew that no one could be as mean as Helen when she decided to be mean and jealous.

And Mrs. McKenna helped, too. I mean she didn't act tragic about it. In fact she painted such an attractive picture for the year ahead in New York that I almost began to look forward to the New School and the Village. She seemed to know a lot about Greenwich Village, a lot of people who lived there.

You could tell, though, although she made awfully light of it, almost avoiding all mention of even the word "college," that she was keenly aware of my depression that was under the nervous hilarity I assumed after she had told me. Laughing when nothing was very funny, talking when I should

have been listening, sometimes even laughing when I should have been crying. She knew. So one day she asked me to a cocktail party. *She* asked *me* to a cocktail party. I mean Mrs. McKenna invited me to her home. No, it wasn't me. She had been so involved with her thoughts that she asked me by mistake. She must have meant someone else. But she seemed to know whom she meant even if I didn't. And I had gone to the party.

It was a Friday night and beginning at about three in the afternoon, as soon as my class got out, I had run back to the apartment and started bathing. Just started, and didn't finish for a couple of hours. And started getting dressed and finished everything up just in time to get there by seven. It wasn't that I ever take baths for more than fifteen minutes or that I ever devote a day to getting dressed for a two-hour gathering, but in the tub I always feel as though I don't really have any arms or legs, nothing to support or to place. Everything seems to float and be comfortable without any effort or even any thought. So I've found that since no thought has to be spent on that sort of thing, the tub is the best place to stay when you want *all* your thoughts on something particular. And I certainly wanted all my thoughts on a very particular something. And the getting dressed, well, it just took a little longer that day.

And then the party . . . I was the only student and the only person calling her Mrs. McKenna. She was Evelyn to everyone else. Except that to Steve, she was Mother. Steve was there because he was on his way to New York from a vacation in Martha's Vineyard—with his wife. When I met her I thought of all those beautiful fantasies I had wasted

about marrying Steve, and I hated her for not making the most of her role, as much as *I* could have made of it.

I don't think I was as angry about wasting the fantasies on Steve because of Marge as much as because of Steve. I don't really know how I had pictured him, but I'm certain it must have been something awfully close to perfection. But there he was now, about 5′ 8″ and about 210 pounds with a big middle-aged paunch and a puffy, stolid-looking face like my old English professor's. But it wasn't even as nice as that, because it was covered with big, pimply welts which he kept picking and then blotting with his napkin. Actually he wasn't a bad-looking boy, I mean without the pimples and without the fat he wouldn't have been bad at all, but now, well just now I couldn't possibly have imagined anything worse.

It was the first time I had ever been to Mrs. McKenna's apartment, and at first I was too busy observing Marge and Steve and the other guests to take a very good look at it. It was one large, pale yellow room with several wicker chairs, almost the same insipid yellow, some violently disturbing abstract paintings, especially the one that hung over the bed with a great glob of red in the center looking like a grotesquely bloody embryo or a distorted devil or just a violent mass of hate, and around the room were surprisingly few books. The books that she did have were paperbacks housed in orange crates, also painted that sickly yellow, and . . . the only really startling object, except for the picture over the bed, was the bed itself. It was the first thing you saw when you came in, and actually the only thing you saw once you were in. This was partly because of its huge triple-width size, but also because of a very gaily and brightly colored

Mexican blanket with which she covered it. It was just that the aliveness and excitement of the blanket contrasted so sharply with the dull, insipid colors and the monotony of almost everything else in the room that quite naturally everyone looked at and sat on this gigantic and somewhat startling creation.

I had had one gin too many and couldn't get up. I really could have gotten up but I might have staggered a little, and certainly that would have disgusted Mrs. McKenna because, although she was gracious about pouring everyone else's drinks, she was careful to drink straight quinine water. I simply would not get up from that bed until I could walk perfectly. I murmured a request to Steve's wife about getting a little food and she promptly called across the room to "Evelyn" who jumped up and ran over to me with nervous anxiety as though Marge had told her that I was in labor, asked if I was all right, did I feel sick, did I want to lie down, would I wait just a moment while she got me a tray, and I waited a moment. I didn't want to contradict Mrs. McKenna. I mean if she thought I was going to vomit and wanted to bring me a tray, that was all right. I might even try to vomit so she wouldn't feel she had been wrong, but after a moment she brought a tray full of cheeses and crackers and then I knew I was drunk. Of course a tray means a *tray*. And she sat on the edge of the couch stuffing food down my throat so fast that if I hadn't felt nauseated from the gin, I would have felt it now from the damn food. But as long as she sat there feeding me, as long as I was occupying one quarter of a millionth of an inch of her thoughts, I'd stay there and eat and eat and eat. God, but I couldn't. I ran to the bathroom, stumbling on her Oriental rug and spilling

someone else's drink all over an awfully brilliant psychology professor and me and the rug.

But Mrs. McKenna understood and she sat me down and told me about something like this that had happened to her when she was my age, putting it all so far in the past and herself on such a pedestal of sobriety and wisdom about these childish occurrences that I felt far, far worse, and humiliated, more so than I could bear. She was awfully kind, though. Understanding my embarrassment she chose that moment to show her guests the enormous Blake portfolio of watercolors I had given her the day before, going through each plate and commenting and praising the art in such a way that I felt she was almost praising me. But I was too humiliated to really appreciate any praise just then. And then John, that psychology professor, suggested that we leave my car in front of "Evelyn's" apartment and let him take me—*me*—to dinner. I really was too dizzy to realize that it was too late for dinner, but I did need food and I was embarrassed that I'd spilled the drink on him, so I went, leaving Mrs. McKenna with her son and daughter-in-law, thanking her profusely for having invited me and looking at her with those cocker spaniel eyes that I try to assume when I have to convey something like the shame and humiliation I felt just then. And she understood my glance and sort of patted my cheek as if to say, "You're all right, dear, don't worry. It happens to us all." It could have happened to me a hundred times. That's not what was bothering me, but why the hell did it have to happen just then, that night at that particular gathering?

As we left, John and I, I waved to Steve and Marge whom I couldn't see very well because I never wear my

glasses at parties, and behind them were all the other professors who I guess were tolerantly smiling good-by, but they were just masses of blurs to me then, partly because of the alcohol and partly because of the glasses. But all evening for some reason I had avoided regarding any of them at close range, even John. I still wasn't sure what he looked like, except that I knew he wore glasses, because they reflected light so I could make them out even at a distance. But the others—I guess I was afraid all along that one of them might turn out to be one of my professors and then I would just have to leave the summer school. It would be bad enough to try to justify myself to Mrs. McKenna in the following days or perhaps to rectify my actions, but she was she. I mean now that I knew she was human I knew that with time I could make her understand. But the others, nothing had yet proven to me that *they* were human.

VI

But John certainly was. He was as good at trying to open blouses as any fresh fraternity kid, and knew all the same lines that somehow sounded ridiculous coming from such a great mind, for John really *had* a great mind. I felt it, but beyond that I knew it and so did everyone else. I had sort of expected some *new* language, the love language of professors, to come from his mouth, but instead it was the same old words. Yes, damn it, he was human too. But nice-human, and seemed to like me well enough not to get uppity about being refused a kiss or even about getting slapped. And if only he had been—then maybe, maybe the rest of the summer would have been different. But it wasn't.

So he kept calling and we saw each other frequently—dinners, concerts, plays, and because he knew Mrs. McKenna, a fact that automatically made a person more attractive to me, and because I knew that he was a friend of hers and that I owed it to her to be nice to him, I invited him over for a spaghetti dinner just before exam week, a sort of good-by affair because I knew I had to immerse myself in my Italian and all the rest, and that I had to pass those exams brilliantly.

VII

It wasn't going to be so simple, either. I had been pretty foolish about that Italian. After I had responded so enthusiastically to Mrs. McKenna's symbolism course I discovered that she also gave one in Poetic Drama, and I started to audit that even though it met during the first hour of my Italian course. And the few times I had met Mrs. McKenna on campus she had never discouraged me. I mean she knew about the Italian and the necessity for my passing the whole thing with an A. In fact, she usually gave me the impression that she admired that sort of strength, doing what one wants to do. I knew damn well that it was a weakness, one of my most dangerous. But one day she changed her tune. I mean she really lost her patience.

After her party I had gotten a job in a coffee shop for ten nights. I had decided that I wanted to give her money. The idea just hadn't come like that. She had said at her cocktail party that she was in debt. She had said it rather humorously. I mean everyone knew it was true, but she hadn't said it tragically or emotionally. Almost as if it were a joke. And even with all that alcohol I had heard it and known that it was damn serious, even if her tone hadn't impressed me. So I had gotten that job and smelled coffee for five hours every night, five hours of smelling coffee, serving coffee, wiping up

coffee, but at least never having to drink it. And after those ten nights I got a check for forty bucks.

It was a disgusting thing to do and I had known that before I did it, and God knows if it had been anyone else I just wouldn't have done it. But somehow there was something indescribable about Mrs. McKenna's attitude that assured me that, although this was a presumptuous and insulting thing to do, somehow she'd understand why I was doing it, and maybe even be pleased.

So I went to her office with that goddamned check and trembled and apologized for fifteen minutes, apologized for being rude and insulting and presumptuous and almost begged her to accept it and assured her that although this was just a drop in the bucket (she had used that phrase once in reference to something or other, so it didn't seem trite to me any longer) it was to be a symbol of much that was to follow. I meant that I wanted to always share anything that I might ever have with her, and I told her this. I shocked myself and God only knows what I must have done to her, talking about what I thought and felt, almost the way I talked to her when I was in the bathtub and she in her apartment at the other end of Middleton.

But I said it all and finally sank back in the chair exhausted, and waited. . . . "That's dear and sweet of you, Nona, but that is an area of my life that no one can ever touch." And when I told her that I had an inordinate desire to *do* something for her, not just to give her an art book or tape her lectures but to *do* something really meaningful, she smiled and said that if I wanted to please her I should do a bang-up job in my courses and get into a first-rate school. Christ, I had heard that sort of thing from everyone in the

world. "If you want to make me happy, Nona dear, just be happy yourself." That line was a specialty with relatives, but it had never meant a damn thing to me. And now it certainly didn't.

I wasn't hurt when Mrs. McKenna rejected the money. I was ashamed and blamed myself harshly for being so pushy, but somewhere amidst all that self-condemnation I had just the tiniest inkling that, even though she had been harsh, at least harsher than she had ever been before, at least she understood, and that was all I could have asked for.

But somehow the anger or defense or embarrassment or whatever it was that she had felt when she told me that no one could ever touch that part of her life must have reminded her of some other anger that she had been feeling for awhile and had never shown, for suddenly she burst out and told me that I was shirking my responsibility to Italian, that I had no right to sit in on her drama course. If she was going to help me get into college she at least wanted to know that I had the gumption and discipline to see something through, even though I was tempted to yield to something a little more attractive. And when she finished and could see that I had nothing to add, I mean it wasn't that I didn't think anything, but I just couldn't possibly have *said* anything after that, she took my hands, forced a somewhat pained smile, thanked me sincerely for the thought, that money stuff, and then I left.

All I could think of as I was walking down the stairs was how much I wished it to be just an hour earlier. God, just sixty minutes earlier. Then all this could have been avoided. I would never have done it if I had known. I had fifteen minutes to get to her poetry lecture, so I took a walk and

walked and walked. But I was crying and didn't want to meet anyone, so I sat behind some building that seemed to be closed for the summer and was far away from the central part of the campus. Why the hell did she have to be so cruel? The bell that meant ten minutes to class rang. Hell, I wouldn't go. She'd see that empty seat in the first row, and no tape recorder set up, and she'd wonder, and maybe she'd feel a little sorry.

Oh, I couldn't *bear* sitting where I was. I had to move. I ran over to a dorm in which I had some friends, thinking I would take a shower. I was so hot, so nervous, but I realized that I didn't really want to take a shower. I didn't know what I wanted to do. If she had really rejected me, I mean if she really didn't want to see me in her class any more, that drama class, and if she had assumed a bad feeling about me now because of the money, then all that happiness I felt at Masefield, or almost all of it, would just puff out like a bubble, and then why the hell should I stay there? I could never work where she was if I couldn't carry around that hope of reaching her somehow. I just couldn't think about anything, anything except suicide, and that was as good as thinking about nothing.

Those old oak trees and that green, green grass, little did they know what it meant to have to live, to have to humanly live. Somehow I think I almost envied their plight. I was walking on some of that grass now--to hell with the signs that said not to--and when I stepped on the little blades and looked back at them they almost instantly snapped back up. Maybe if Mrs. McKenna stepped on them they wouldn't be able to snap back so easily, maybe not at all, like me just now. Then perhaps they'd know what it was all about.

And while I was watching the little pieces of grass making their heroic comebacks after my attacks on them, I felt a sharp slap on my back. Oh, God, *Bob*. Just the wrong person to see now. "Coming to class? You've only got a couple of minutes."

"No, Bob, not today, I don't feel very well. . . . Oh, Bob, she wouldn't accept the money and she never wants to see me in that damn drama course again and all I can think of is suicide—oh, Bob!" and I broke down in that special way I had of breaking down when I was with men. I don't really know what the difference was, but when I was with women I always did it differently. I needed sympathy from women, but with men I also needed some sort of protection, assurance, and that certainly required a special technique, a special way of appealing to the protective instincts that men always prided themselves on. Anyway, Bob had seen me through all the plans for this money idea and knew all about the whole thing, probably more than I did. And somehow he always saved me, even if it was only a momentary salvation, at least from the *most* profound depths of depression to which my imagination had the power of taking me. He just smiled at me, an understanding, knowing smile that spoke for him, and handed me a book that he had with him, some essay of John Donne's that had a Greek title, some logical refutation of the whole idea of suicide. But I didn't need the essay. Just seeing Bob made a lot change. He didn't mean very much to me as "Bob," but as a reminder that there were other people in the world and, probably more than anything, through his affection he had made me very conscious of my importance to *myself*, something I usually became pretty

unconscious of in involvements like this. So we started to walk to class together.

The hall was filled when we got there, and my empty seat in the first row was really noticeable, giving me a crazy kind of important feeling. McKenna hadn't arrived yet, so I quickly set up the recorder and was determined not to lift my eyes from the notebook, not to look at her once during the whole lecture. Let her worry a little. I mean let her think that she'd hurt me . . . or that she didn't mean anything to me any more. . . . Let her . . .

"Nona, may I speak to you for a moment?"

My head was down when I heard this, and I looked and saw that green tunic dress. She always seemed to wear it whenever anything the least bit unusual happened, and I looked up and saw her face nervously smiling, and she gestured with her hand and started walking to the back of the auditorium. God, everyone was looking at us. It was already ten minutes late for class time and everyone was staring and following us with their eyes all the way to the back, the very last row of seats, in which she sat down and put down a seat for me. I was really too nervous to even look at her. Hadn't she said enough? I had gotten the point. I knew what she meant; she didn't have to clarify it. I wasn't . . .

"Nona, you know I'm very busy this week, but starting next Monday I should have a little extra time, and I want you to call me every night that you have time and you can come over for an hour or so, and we'll read Dante together in Italian. Would you like that?"

Would I *like* that . . . did she need an answer? Well, if she did it was too bad, because I couldn't give her one. I really had that damn lump in my throat that everyone is

always talking about, and anyway I was beginning to cry and if I had had to say anything I really would have cried. But we shook hands the way we always did, the way we had of telling each other that we understood . . . and after that I could listen to her lecture, and I wasn't the least bit interested in that Greek essay or in doing anything really except of course mastering every Italian grammar rule in the world by Monday and learning, learning, just learning every single thing that she knew and that she would want me to learn, and now I was accepted again and so I guess I was happy.

VIII

So I really had reason for being concerned about my Italian exam and for wanting to shut myself off from everything those last days before exams, and John understood, and understood that this spaghetti dinner was to be our last evening together. It was a nice way to say good-by, though. An enormous platter of spaghetti and Italian bread and some marvelous white wine that John had brought for me, and even a tossed salad. It was the first dinner that I had bothered to cook all summer and it was fun to have someone to share it with. John was pretty happy. I mean there *was* that feeling that this was the last night, but still you could tell that aside from that we were both sort of happy. In fact, John was trying very hard not to give either of us a chance to think about its being the end. He was a real actor, and not a bad one either. When he saw that I had finished in the kitchen and saw that it was time to "experience the culinary wonders," he jumped up, threw the large white napkin over his arm like some *maître d'* in an elegant New York restaurant and pulled my chair out for me with that patronizing "Madam?" that the waiters always throw in, and just as he was pushing the chair in, I mean really *just* as he was pushing the chair toward the table, the phone rang.

That house in which my apartment was had a crazy phone system. There was one for the whole house and mine was the only apartment on the first floor. I think there were something like six floors. Anyway, it was the logical thing for me to take the phone since it was situated right outside my door, but the whole thing was so disorganized. The hundred and ten times that I did answer it, it always seemed to be for the person on the fifth floor or the sixth and then I'd have to run all the way up and knock and tell the person it was for him and if it happened to be the person on the sixth floor who didn't speak English I'd have to stand there and pantomime-act for ten minutes before he realized that I was telling him he had a phone call. The dope, why the hell else did he think I'd knock on his door! But then there were the few times, maybe ten all summer, when I had let the phone ring and ring until Mrs. Third Floor, who seemed to do nothing but receive phone calls all day, would have to come down, and those were always the times that the calls were mine, and I was pretty embarrassed because she was an old woman and had had to came all the way down just for me.

Somehow, though, with John there and all, I mean with all that alive happiness I was feeling, I really didn't mind the idea of my having to answer the phone. In fact it would probably impress John. I guess that I was hoping it would be some boy calling me to wish me good luck on my exams and say good-by before my week of seclusion began. So I jumped up quickly, which wasn't hard, because I had barely sat down, and ran out into the hall, making sure to leave the living-room door open so that he could hear the conversation.

"Hello. . . ."

"Nona, this is Mrs. McKenna." The voice was so faint, so weak that if it hadn't been for her accent I would never have recognized her.

"Yes, Mrs. McKenna," I answered, a bit out of breath from having run to the phone and with the aliveness that one can't really hide when one is busy and happy.

"Are you busy, Nona?"

"No, of course not."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"Well, could you come over?"

"Now?"

"Uh-huh, now."

"Sure."

"O.K., then, dear, you'll be over soon?"

"Of course, Mrs. McKenna, immediately."

I dashed back to the apartment.

"Oh, John, if anyone would understand this you would. That was her. John, she sounded so terrible. I don't know what it could be. She wants me to come right over. Now you stay right here and eat everything off that platter and drink the wine and the Mozart records are over there on the table, and I should be back, well, I don't know about that but if you get tired of waiting just leave and I'll call you either tonight or tomorrow." And with a hasty kiss and a frantic look around to see if I had forgotten anything, " 'By, Johnny, please understand, and I'll call you." And that was all. I left.

IX

I didn't observe one single sign or light all the way over, and when I got there and didn't see a parking spot right in front of the door I just pulled in front of a hydrant and didn't think twice about it. Middleton was nothing like New York. I mean you could park on the sidewalk and you'd probably never get tagged. But even if I had gotten tagged I wouldn't have minded. What the hell would it matter? Mrs. McKenna had actually called me; now what could possibly matter at a time like this? I buzzed for the elevator, but the indicator said that it was up on the eleventh floor which meant that it would have to come all the way down and then . . . Whatever it meant I didn't have time for it, and took the service stairs and ran up all four flights without a pause. I had never used the stairs before, so when I got to the fourth floor it took me a minute to realize where her apartment was in relation to the staircase. And how I thought that one minute would never end, I mean that one second. It was only a second of not knowing where I was, and as soon as I saw the incinerator I remembered. But it was just another second between us. And then I was there in her apartment. She had left the door open for me and I walked in, almost losing my balance during that sudden transition from running to walking. But I couldn't possibly have *run* into her apartment

because it was dark and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust, for me to see where she was.

At first all I could see were a lot of crates. She had told me she had started packing her things. And then I saw her standing over the phonograph in a white nightgown, her hair disheveled and stringy, and, as my eyes were adjusted now, I could see that she was deathly pale. Over the eight weeks of the summer session, seven and a half since there were two more days of classes, she had slowly lost her sunburn and had become paler and paler. But even this morning in class she hadn't looked anything like this.

"What's the matter?" My throat was so parched from all the running, and most probably from the general emotional shock of this whole thing, that I could barely speak. "What's the matter?" I asked again.

"Nothing, Nona, nothing's the matter," she said tragically, and meaning that everything was the matter. "I'm just tired. I don't know if you're too young to understand, but I'm very, very tired. You know I've been working for eighteen months without one single vacation. Just very tired and lonely and, well, Nona, you know, I'm frightened. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Of course I do," I said with all my heart, and ventured to touch her arm affectionately. But then she grabbed my hands, gripped them with an intensity and fright.

"Nona dear, you know once you said you wanted to do something for me?"

"Yes, yes," I said anxiously, so happy that she had remembered.

"Would you do something for me now? Would you stay

with me for a while? I just feel I can't possibly stay alone, you know? Would you, Nona?"

I couldn't answer. If I had, she would have seen me weep and now I knew that I had to be the strong one, so I just nodded frantically and she gripped my shoulders and then sat down in that large wicker chair and I sat on the floor with my head in her lap and my hands in hers.

Whenever I had thought of Death as Woman I had always pictured something resembling Mrs. McKenna as she looked that night. That deadly pallor, the frail weak movements, her small tense voice, her whole body trembling. I could feel her thighs under my cheeks and her hands which I was holding shaking uncontrollably. I couldn't say anything, and if I could have it wouldn't have mattered because there was really nothing to say. No advice I could give. No great experience I could speak from. All I could do was to speak with my heart, to show her that I did understand and to give her that tactual affection that from the moment I had walked in that night she had tacitly demanded.

"You know, Nona, after teaching last year I was invited to a summer conference in Geneva and then taught all this year without a break. Another spring conference in Connecticut and then the Swarthmore examining and then the summer school stuff. And, well, here we are." That was a favorite expression of hers which she always used when she was at a loss for words and felt that she was expected to say something. Often, if we were just quietly together, she would suddenly come out with "Well, here we are," and then relax, feeling somehow that she had made her contribution. And after she had told me about the school business and tried to show me why she was so tired she went on talking about a

hundred other things. All those "things" that I used to think I'd give anything to be able to sit for an hour a week and listen to, but now that I was getting what I had been dreaming about all summer I wasn't really listening at all. I mean, Christ, I *couldn't*. I was far too busy reminding myself that Mrs. Evelyn Gordon McKenna was actually sitting here next to me in her own apartment asking *me* for something. I was actually needed and wanted and here I was and there she was and I couldn't believe it, so I kept looking at things that were familiar to me in terms of Evelyn Gordon McKenna, the professor—the Keats that she brought to class every day or the purse that she always carried, sitting over there on the table, or her sandals in the corner. And I looked at her while she was speaking words that I couldn't hear and then I couldn't remember her carrying the Keats or holding the pocketbook or wearing the sandals. She was the same-looking person, but there was no trace of the professor except the accent. I mean she was a depressed woman now and suddenly I was a friend. Not *really* a friend, but certainly I was more than just an ordinary student to her. I *had* to be because I wanted to be. So I pretended I was.

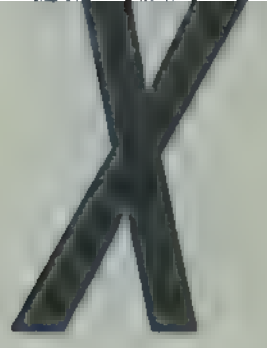
And then I suggested that she get up and get dressed and that I take her for a drive. I had been wanting to say this for over an hour but certainly she had called me over to "intellectualize" her problems with someone. She certainly wouldn't want to go out and then she'd say no and I'd be depressed because of another rejection.

But she thought it was a damn good idea and got dressed and asked me to take her to my apartment. No. It couldn't be that she actually was going to be inside my apartment. Actually walking on the same floor I had been walking on all

summer, perhaps sitting in the chairs I sat in. And if she did, I mean if she really sat in one of my chairs, I'd never sit in another chair ever. I'd take it back to New York with me and keep it and then when I read in it I'd read that much faster and remember that much more. But I knew she'd never really go inside. I mean it was possible that we might get to the front door and then of course I'd just have to understand that she'd come to her senses and realize she was wasting precious time with some nutty little student who wasn't "helping" her at all, and decide that she'd want me to take her back to her place.

But that's not how it happened. She really wanted to get out of her apartment, and seemed to want to go to mine. So we went. John had left, and left thousands of crumbs from the Italian bread all over the rug and the dishes in the sink and . . . but I didn't mind. The least I could do was to clean up after him since I had so rudely walked out on him. But he had left the wine, the tall bottle of white wine, almost untouched in the refrigerator. That was nice, I thought, and offered some to Mrs. McKenna. And so she had a glass and then asked for another one and after the third I just kept refilling her glass so that she wouldn't have to ask me, and while she was drinking she asked me to read to her from the *Inferno*, and then, well, I don't really know. I guess she talked but I couldn't hear her, again because trying to believe that she was there was about all my mind could handle. And then she asked me to take her home. It seemed as though she had been there for about half an hour, but when I went into the bedroom I saw that it was twelve-thirty. How it had gotten so late I didn't know or care, but I went into the bedroom to get the little gift that I had to give

her that coming Saturday at her packing-up party. It was only some sachet but she loved it and asked me to kiss her. "Kiss me, Nona." She had asked me to kiss her. I was afraid to touch her cheek but then she kissed mine. And when I took her back and left her at the elevator in her lobby she suddenly, instead of going into the elevator when the doors opened, she suddenly turned and embraced me. Not with love, I didn't think, or gratitude, or anything like that, anything I had ever been used to associating with kisses, but with desperation. A desperate feeling of loneliness and despair was in that kiss, and though I offered to stay she insisted that she could see the night through without me. There actually wasn't much night left, but I didn't see how she could bear to be alone at all when she felt like that. But she seemed to feel all would be well.



In less than twelve hours I'd go to her office and ask her out for dinner that evening. Oh, I couldn't. She'd be so embarrassed by then that she had bothered coming to a student that she wouldn't want to be reminded of it in any way. Even by just seeing me. But I wouldn't mention anything. I'd just ask her. Then I went to her drama course that met just before the hour I was to go to her office. It was next to the last day of class and she would have to rush along through *The Cocktail Party* and, paler than she had been the night before and trembling obviously, she did rush. And then, then at the end of the class she went quickly out to her office, carefully avoiding my eyes which had been watching her every moment. I gave her a few moments to get to her office and sit down and then I bombed in, out of breath as I always was with her, even when I hadn't been running. I mean the nervous strain itself, the strain that I went through every time I had to think of going to her, think of what to say, and then worry and wonder about what she'd think. That was the worst of it, that worrying about her reactions to every word and gesture of mine. All this made me breathless and I would have been even if I had been carried into her office and not had to walk at all.

This time all that breathlessness was unnecessary because without more than a moment's effort I had asked her and she had accepted and I was back outside on my way to Italian. It was hard for me to understand her acceptance, to believe that anything could warrant her willingness or perhaps desire to spend time with me. Supposing she was depressed and tired from the summer's load, one would think that she would want the company of a gay and entertaining person rather than one who would be bound to be most serious and heavy. What she needed, it seemed to me, was someone so uninvolved with her that his reactions would be distant and not give her that chance to be utterly tragic about herself. If she'd say she felt she was going to die soon, which she had said on many occasions, I would have said, "Don't talk like that, you're young and beautiful and . . ." and just given her many opportunities for saying, "No, I'm not young and not beautiful," and then she'd feel far worse than she had when she said it in the first place. She needed someone who would laugh at her and say, "We're all going to die. What makes you so special that you're going to be first?" But I had no intentions of even trying that stuff. She had called upon *me* and I had to *be* me whether or not it would be disappointing to her. So I picked her up for dinner and drove far out of Middleton to a quiet, uncrowded restaurant.

While the first round of Manhattans was being consumed she spoke for one of the first times since we had been at the table. "You know, Nona, it's a strange thing. You know, you've adopted *me*. You've adopted me as your child. Well, you have, haven't you?" It was more a plea than a question, almost as if she had said, "Please adopt me, please take care

of me, at least just now." So I did. I mean I knew I would. I'd take care of her in whatever way I could. I'd do anything and she knew it. So I smiled and she ordered another Manhattan.

And after the fourth Manhattan she grasped my hands across the table. "Nona, don't get upset but I may just faint. It's been known that I do faint. Are you frightened?" But she was frightened enough for the two of us; I didn't have to be, besides which I didn't have time to be. Amazed and surprised, but not frightened. She sat there quietly drinking and picking at her enormous steak which probably would have taken her through the next week. I mean she ate only a tenth of it. And while I was having ice cream she had another Manhattan.

"Have you lived in Ireland most of your life?" I asked, trying to break the silence which was making us both nervous.

She looked as though she hadn't understood me.

"I mean, is your home in Ireland?"

"I don't have a home," she said, quickly filling her mouth with her Manhattan as if she wanted to make it impossible to go on talking about her home.

"Your family, I mean . . ."

"I don't have a family."

And after she had turned over her glass to make certain she had gotten every last drop from it, she pushed it away from her, right into my dish of ice cream, left it there, and with a very long and deep sigh continued, "You see, my parents are both dead, and I don't have any sisters or brothers. Ireland is just where I grew up, but I don't live there. I don't live anywhere. This year I lived in Middleton, and

the year before in Berkeley, and before that in Swarthmore, and before that in Wisconsin, and before that all over Europe and America, too. . . . You see, Nona, I don't have a home. It's just that Trinity lets me teach there whenever I can't get a job somewhere else. I like America, though. My son's here, you know."

"Yes, I know, and I'm sure you know you'll always have a home with him."

"No, I can't, I can't do that," she snapped angrily, as though she were angry with her son right then.

"You have such a beautiful accent, Mrs. McKenna. Such a beautiful Irish accent," I said, trying to bring back her gentleness that had been lost under all this talk of homes and families.

"Accent? Do I have an accent? I don't have an accent, do I?" And then some more silences and many "Well, here we ares" until she discovered a game to play. Guessing the name of the waitress. At the time that Mrs. McKenna thought of the game the waitress was on the other side of a room about thirty feet wide, but that didn't seem to matter.

"I bet her name is Rachel," she said softly to me, whereupon she turned and called out, "Is your name Rachel? Waitress, oh, waitress, I bet your name is Rachel." The waitress meanwhile had come over to our table hoping to quiet her, since the other dinner guests were not as appreciative as they might have been, and shook her head mildly. Mrs. McKenna was disappointed and the waitress went away. After a moment's dejection and thought she called back to the waitress, "Oh, I know what your name must be. It must be Martha. That's it, isn't it?" And another tolerant, patient "No." Mrs. McKenna was shattered but seemed angry too

for having wasted such beautiful names on the girl and with utter disgust said, "Hell, I bet her name is Molly. That's it, that's what it must be, Molly." She didn't seem to care any more whether I agreed or not. She was satisfied simply to have insulted the waitress to herself and grew anxious to leave, despite my being in the middle of dessert.

"Can you walk?" I asked meekly, more afraid of the results of her trying to walk than of her response to the question.

"Can I walk? Why, I can *ski!*" Whereupon she staggered and fell on top of a set table, breaking the glasses and ripping off the cloth which she had clung to for support. I grabbed her by the arm and helped her back to her feet and while we were walking she murmured under her breath, "Don't make it so obvious." And I knew that she had pride, strong, personal pride, but it wasn't strong enough against that terrible need, that terrible dependency.

As soon as the waitress was no longer around, in fact as soon as we were outside, she became very witty and giddy and hysterical. "Are you consumptives?" she asked loudly, pointing her long tapering finger at the patrons who were rocking on the porch of the inn, and her laughter over what she had said went on and on and on, and I laughed with her until she stopped. She kissed me on each cheek and warmly, and weakly, said "I love you" before she got out of the car.

XI

I wasn't to see her the next day. I told her she was too weak to teach so she arranged for her assistant to take over.

But somehow as I went from class to class I was scared. I trembled and felt empty. Not empty because I hadn't had breakfast but empty with a kind of anxiety, a longing—not the kind of longing that makes you blossom with smiles and radiate with joy—but the kind that gnaws at your viscera, knocks at your temples, and throbs in your legs. I didn't know what I was longing for, whether it was a hopeless desire to go back to last night, to live through it again, or whether it was a fearful longing for tomorrow night to come, the night of her party. And my fear, I guess, was a fear that any minute she would appear on campus. Maybe even though she had finished lecturing she'd have to come back for some paper work, or to return books to the library and I'd meet her, and I'd pretend to act normal, to say hello the way she'd say hello—and I looked, no matter where I walked, I looked. She was nowhere.

But I heard her name. I hadn't gone to her drama course since I knew that it would either be conducted by her assistant or dismissed early, and as I walked past the building where it was being given I found out that it had

been dismissed early. In groups of twos and threes the students were leaving the hall and "McKenna" was heard darting amidst their mutterings.

"Nona!" Ellen screamed, running towards me with a speed that only anger could have prompted. "Nona, do you know what she did? *Damn it.* All I can say is damn it. She was going to go over the whole exam with us today, tell us what to expect, what works to concentrate on, *everything.* And she didn't show up. *She didn't show up.* The class was furious and the assistant wouldn't tell us anything. She said McKenna wasn't coming to class and that she didn't have the authority to discuss the exam. . . . Nona! You're crying. What have I said?"

I told Ellen the whole story. I looked as if I was crying because there were tears on my cheeks, but at the same time my mouth was laughing, my heart was pounding, and my head was throbbing. It was a kind of suffering that I had never known before. And suddenly Ellen changed her entire countenance. It was as if a warm zephyr had blown past her face, and even entered her heart. She had no anger left. She couldn't. All she had, it seemed at that moment, was a heart. She put her hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes and it seemed for a minute that her eyes were twice as large as they had ever been before, and twice as brown. Almost whispering she said, "Nona, how beautiful. She *needs* you." She kept looking into my eyes and there was silence. The students had all left the hall and since classes were now in session the campus was deserted. I could feel her hands on my shoulders moving with the trembling of my body.

And I think it was because of what Ellen said in that soft, warm whisper that day, and the thought of my father and home, where being needed would never, *could* never be thought of as something beautiful, that I realized what I had. For I had not only the need of someone whom I loved but I had it in a situation where I could dwell on it, build on it, *live* on it without parental restrictions, both loving and violent as they always were.

As I walked toward the Italian building my heart was soaring in my chest, my arms were light, my nerves tingled. I knew now what my longing was for and it wasn't to relive the night before. I was longing with my whole being for the two weeks ahead that I had in Middleton before the lease was to run out, the weeks in which I could, with no restrictions in the world, let my self, my real, uninhibited self that I knew only in my dreams and fantasies, take over.

The next day, Saturday, she had the party. The purpose was to have all her friends over and get herself packed up and ready for the movers. I had sent her flowers with a note hoping that they would help to keep her apartment from becoming too depressing during the coming days when she had planned to sleep on a mattress on the floor and leave out only one chair and one lamp and one table setting. There were enough flowers to decorate a corpse. And come to think of it, they *were* awfully funereal. The whole idea of sending them to her with that note for that purpose seemed to be an omen. The flowers assumed the inevitable depression that she would feel and the number of flowers seemed to speak for the intensity of the depression. But then again, they

smelled lovely and were gaily colored and perhaps she wouldn't think of the rest.

The door was open and about ten guests who had already arrived were standing around drinking. Evelyn McKenna was on the floor, legs crossed, drinking beer.

"Oh, Nona, you've come." She stood up and staggered over, throwing her arms around my neck. "Nona, the flowers are just beautiful. You're so sweet, mmmm. Come here and meet my friends. . . . Nona, this is the Dante scholar of the world. He knows everything there is to know about Dante, don't you, Phil? . . . Oh, you do too. And this, Nona, is the most beautiful girl in the world. Don't you think so? Don't you think she's the most beautiful thing you've ever seen? And this, this is the girl who got highest, did you hear me, Nona, *highest* honors from Swarthmore this June. I know, I gave them to her *myself*." And after several more introductions like that I couldn't remember one name of anybody there. I almost found myself saying, "Oh, Mr. Dante scholar, would you like some more beer?" or "You who got highest honors from Swarthmore . . ." but somehow I didn't. But it was a monstrous affair. Evelyn McKenna was too drunk to know what she was saying or what was going on. She barely realized that within five minutes all her guests had forgotten the purpose of the party and were sprawled over the floor playing some intellectual version of "Who am I?" and drinking all her beer. I was terrified. I couldn't play a game like that with professors, "world-famous" scholars, and highest honors students, so I retreated, went into the kitchen, and did what the invitation had implied—packed up.

The two little electric fans in the living-room window were whirring and the general din of voices and motion was

throbbing with the heat in the kitchen, but every so often I could hear some of the conversation.

The game seemed to have come to a standstill for a moment. Someone said something about Jews making the best husbands.

"What do you mean?" said a male voice, somewhat defensively.

"They're good in business, they don't drink, they . . ."

And Mrs. McKenna's voice, "They're circumcised, *that's* the whole thing. That's the whole point, they're circumcised. Men that are circumcised are so much better than men that aren't. Pasha . . . Pasha? What made me call you Pasha? It's Moira, isn't it? Of course. Well, Moira, you know, don't you agree? Don't you agree it's much better? After all, how many men *have* you slept with, darling?"

Moira slammed her glass down on the floor and came running into the kitchen. Leaning over the sink she doused her face, kicking the kitchen door closed with her foot, and sat down at the small, white table with her head in one hand and a glass of water in the other. She didn't pay any attention to me and I went on wrapping the forks and cups and jars as though she wasn't there. I was thinking so hard I didn't have much time to get bored or feel hot or tired.

It is obvious that Mrs. McKenna is a very sick woman, I thought. Most likely she's right about dying soon. I mean, Christ, she's as thin as I've ever seen anyone and pale and weak and now frightened and drunk. Those asses in there, they don't give a damn about her. They came so they can tell their colleagues tomorrow, "I was at Evelyn Gordon McKenna's house last night." If she dies, I mean right now during the party, they'd still only say "I was at Evelyn

Gordon McKenna's house last night." Well, I know that I've got to go to Greece with her. There is no doubt in my mind that she definitely can not go alone, but where the hell will I get the money? I really don't care if my father disowns me. I'm just about ready to disown him anyway. And besides it wouldn't be bad. I could take care of her and see that she eats well and all that and then she'd read Dante to me, or help me write. Sure, it would be the greatest experience of my life. And anyway I know better than to think I could possibly function in New York this year knowing that she's alone and drunk in Greece. . . .

"Nona, are you almost finished? I want you to come in here and talk with us, darling."

"Just a few more minutes, Mrs. McKenna. I'll be right in."

. . . Why does she keep calling me? . . . She's surrounded by the most brilliant people in all of Middleton and she still calls for me. Oh, damn it, she's giving all her extra books away. Yes, Carla *would* get *Crime and Punishment*. . . . Why doesn't she come in and give something to me? Probably considers me the illiterate of the group . . . should have known better than to expect anything . . . probably doesn't . . .

"No, no, no . . . this has to go to someone who understands *me* . . . Nona, Nona, where's Nona?" And staggering into the kitchen she threw her arm around my neck. "Nona, this is the only creative piece I've ever published, and it's *me*," she said, slapping her breast, and gave me a Quarterly with one of her short stories in it. How could I ever have imagined that this would happen? God, her only copy of it, and it's she. She didn't give herself to those others. She gave them Tolstoy and Chekhov, but not herself. *I* had Evelyn Gordon McKenna, right there somewhere between the two blue covers, and I was happy again.

My father had once told me that the earth goes around and around and I tried to see if school wouldn't come to me. I mean I just stood still and faced in the direction of school and waited to see if the earth, the sidewalks and houses and grass, would all slowly start going past me and school would come to me. It never did, but that was all right now because Evelyn McKenna had come to me and that was much better than school anyway, at least elementary school.

While I was wrapping one of the knives I cut my finger and soiled all her tablecloths. They were in the bottom drawer, and I had left the bottom drawer open a little and cut my finger right over the drawer so that all that purple stuff suddenly wasn't in my finger any more but in the drawer on her grandmother's lace coverings, and it hurt like hell but I would have liked it to always hurt, to always have that pain in my finger and to be standing on a stool hot and tired packing up those things in that kitchen because it was Evelyn McKenna's kitchen and Evelyn McKenna's knife, and as long as I had that pain I knew I was still there at the party. But the pain went away and everything got packed and the party was over. When I had driven over earlier in the evening I had stopped the car a few blocks from her apartment house and said to myself a hundred times . . . you're going to her party. The last time you'll see her . . . just a few more minutes and you'll be there . . . and by stopping the car I was trying to hold on to those few moments of anticipation. I would rather have stayed like that all my life, anticipating what was to come, than to actually go and have it have to be over, definitely, permanently over, never to be anticipated again. But it *was* over and it had been good-by.

But what if she ever felt frightened in Greece? Whom

would she call . . . who would be there to care for her or stay with her until she wasn't frightened any more? When I had asked her if she were frightened of life or of death she had said the two can't be separated. That means she must be frightened all the time. How terrible it must be to always be frightened. But just then I should have known how terrible it was because I was damn frightened myself, having only two days before my Italian exam. Sunday and Monday, and Tuesday morning was the exam. That gave me approximately forty-eight hours, and I made a study plan utilizing each of the forty-eight with a possible three out for eating. The plan was to go into effect as of six A.M. Sunday morning. But what was more important at six A.M. Sunday morning? Was it the Italian or was it the problem of my doing something about Evelyn McKenna? I knew I wouldn't be seeing her again, but that didn't matter because I knew she was going to Greece and I knew all I'd have to do would be to contact her publishers for her address. And then when I'd get there I'd drop her a note telling her where I was staying so if she'd need me for anything she'd know I was there. But I didn't know anything about going and then I forgot that I *wanted* to go and convinced myself that I *had* to go. Necessity was a much better excuse for not studying than desire was. And knowing that I had to go and that I didn't know how to go about it, what kind of a good-by note to leave for my parents or how to get a passport or, most important, how to get the money, I drove up to New Hampshire where a wonderful friend lived who had always helped me make decisions one way or the other.

XII

By the time I arrived there I realized that I could already have covered the first ten chapters in the Italian grammar . . . and I had decided to sell my typewriter, tape recorder, and books. The car was the thing to bring in the money, but it wasn't in my name.

I told Herb everything. He lived in a small cottage on a little hill near the water. No one else for miles around. The only other living things there besides him and me were the goats with long curly white horns. He rented them every summer just for their company while he wrote. At first he turned green with disgust and pity mixed together. I have often heard people say that they think someone turned green just because they didn't like the person's expression, but Herb did turn green, and whatever the stuff was that made him look green also must have sickened his heart, if hearts get sick, because he looked very sad. Almost like Evelyn McKenna. And the sick look got worse and worse the more I said, and the more I said the less chance I gave him to say anything, and after I had spoken a monologue all morning and was afraid of what he would say I decided that I didn't have the time to hear him out, that I had to get back to Italian, to my apartment—by now I could have been up to the twentieth chapter in the grammar—but Herb managed to

stop me just as I was getting into the car. We were standing against the front of the car, the same car that Evelyn McKenna had been in, and we were looking out over the peaceful, tranquil water and the clear skies and giant pines, all of which Evelyn McKenna had never seen. And Herb's own tranquillity was so pleasant to be near, his own happiness and stability, the kind that perhaps Evelyn McKenna would never know herself. And then quietly, as Herb always did everything, quietly and calmly and firmly he told me what would happen. . . .

I'd sell the things that I had planned to, which would essentially amount to stealing from my parents, and I'd leave without notice, which would shatter and ruin them, and I'd have wasted their money and betrayed their trust, but they'd forgive all that because they loved me . . . they'd forgive it but that wouldn't mean that they'd send me money . . . no money at all for a few months . . . and then I'd get to Greece and live with her and serve her and make her beds and do her washing and buy her food and get her well, and then she'd be well again and get stronger and stronger and wouldn't really need me at all . . . but I'd still be there and I'd begin to get on her nerves because she would have had enough of me and I wouldn't have had enough of her . . . I mean I wouldn't want to leave her, and besides I wouldn't have any money to live alone . . . and no family to take me back. . . . "And who the hell do you think you're doing this for, Nona—just an old drunken woman whose troubles are far more complex than you could ever imagine, and far too involved ever to be helped by you."

And then my schooling. . . . He said right now maybe I thought that traveling with her would be better than going

to some boring lectures, but what about that degree? And then he added that understanding part. I mean he always thought my ideas were crazy and that I should never follow my unreliable impulses . . . but it wasn't like anyone else saying it, because he understood why I had the impulses to begin with and understood why I always felt so strongly about these apparently crazy notions . . . he understood that I could never live with myself if I were always to be tortured by the idea that if I had gone perhaps I could have saved her. Perhaps she would have lived longer or perhaps she would have been happier. Herb really understood this, but he was trying to show me possibilities that I could never have imagined myself. When he saw that he hadn't gotten anywhere with me, when I still had that distant look, being off somewhere in Greece while he was talking to me in New Hampshire, he suggested a plan. Instead of going over and perhaps finding out very bitterly that she wouldn't want me or need me, I should instead get a passport and get the passage and assure her that if she ever needed me once she was there she should cable and I'd come.

If she cabled me I'd come . . . if she cabled me I'd come . . . but she knew I had to get A's at the New School, so that would mean that she'd never cable me. It would mean having to give up school and family and everything. She cares about me, I mean she *really* cares about me and she'd never call me over. But hell, what if she did? I'd go. Good-by, family, school, sanity, future, everything. What am I saying? It wouldn't be good-by to anything. I'd write and learn, and my parents would never cut me off entirely. They'd suffer too much themselves. Sure, it wouldn't be bad if I went. But the woman has the power of turning against

you, Herb had said. She probably drops people just because she doesn't need them any more or because they criticize her or for some not very important reason. But that just meant that he couldn't imagine what she'd be like when she really loved someone, when she really was concerned about the other person. But all right, Herb had made me promise that I wouldn't go over, at least not just then, so I promised that I'd at least wait for her to write and to see how she was getting along.

Driving back to Middleton was like driving into the jaws of a whale . . . that Italian just waiting for me. I could have done the whole grammar and part of a novel by now. And Dante, let's see, if I fail to remember the damn novel I'll start quoting. . . .

"Nel mezzo del cammin . . ."

But it wasn't really Dante that I was thinking about then, that instant when my mind turned to his name, nor was I thinking particularly about the *Inferno*, nor my Italian, nor Evelyn McKenna for that matter. Dante and the whole Italian mess were just something Latin to me then. I mean anything Italian or Spanish was one-and-the-same to me when I was in a mood like this, a mood of uncertainty, of not knowing exactly where I was going or what I was doing. And if perhaps I did know for once where I was going or what I was doing, I didn't like it very much. No, under everything, I didn't like very much living a summer through someone else, for actually I hadn't done a thing on my own the whole eight weeks. Everything I did or thought, I did or thought because I was hoping to get some sort of reaction from Evelyn McKenna, and I was so busy making her moods my moods, and her love affairs mine, those of them she had told

me about at my apartment and at the restaurant, having them assume the importance of affairs in my own life and thinking about them, smiling at the ideas of good and beauty in them and sorrowing at the aspects of pain and badness in them as if I had felt the love and felt the pain and wept the tears myself, that I hadn't given myself the time or the chance to try to find any love of my own.

I had come to Masefield with visions of meeting a tall, sturdy, terribly brilliant man who would love me and teach me, to whom I could talk, of whom I could ask questions, questions which anyone who didn't love me would think stupid, and a man, primarily, with all the rest of it, whom I could love all summer long. But now because I hadn't gotten that I had a crazy superior kind of feeling toward anyone who didn't love Evelyn McKenna, who didn't know about her, who hadn't been chosen by her to love her and care for her, and I let that superior feeling go wherever it wanted to go because it was all I had to show at the end of eight weeks at Masefield. No, I didn't like very much not having anything beautiful, I mean love-beautiful, man-beautiful, as a part of my own life to think about. And although I squirmed and sickened at the stories that went around about all the many, many affairs Mrs. McKenna had had with famous poets and scholars and writers, there were moments when I envied her for having had a man, men, and being able to talk about them. And it was at times when my mind was working like that that anything Spanish or Italian, anything Latin, had a special beauty and nostalgia for me because once, one night, for a few brief hours, I had known a little of that which Evelyn McKenna spoke about so much. . . .

Miguel had said he was a descendant of Cervantes and for some reason Cervantes and Dante became confused in my mind, and Spanish and Italian became confused, and when I started reciting the *Inferno*, really meaning and wanting to do something about my Italian course, I didn't get any farther than the word *cammin*. When I got to *cammin* I don't know exactly what happened. My mind just went off somewhere, off to the one night of love I ever had or perhaps ever would have to think about or perhaps to escape to when I didn't have anything else very beautiful to think about.

"*Cammin* . . . *cammin* . . . come in . . . please come in, Miguel."

"But it isn't even your house, Nona, and besides absolutely not . . ."

"Oh, Miguel, please, please, just this once."

"Nona, there are two kinds of women to us Europeans, the kind you sleep with and the kind you marry. Let's have no confusion, *si*?"

Si, si, but I hadn't seen at all because I loved him. Even when I had known him for only two hours I had loved him. And now it had been months, and I wanted Miguel or nothing. What the hell does it mean to sleep with a man? I don't know but I want to. Never before but now I do. I know what it is to know that you want something. But no, *Señor* Morality said no. But not for long. . . . "Let's go to the park," he had said a few weeks later.

So we went to the bench that was all the way over in the corner under the weeping willow where no one could see you. I mean the branches came down like a screen and we

were there on a bench. My first really passionate kiss. Oh, I mean I had been kissed like that before but when you really like the boy it makes it all so different. And then he put his hand on my leg and I knew what that meant, but I didn't stop him. And then that even-Steven sort of stuff. He started to undo his zipper. Oh, my God, my first . . . never saw one before . . . wonder if it looks the same as an American one . . . God, he's really opening it . . . am I supposed to compliment him? . . . I mean will he expect me to say something? . . . but I don't know what to say . . . besides, how am I supposed to know if it is beautiful or not—I've never seen one that wasn't beautiful or one that was or one that . . . Oh, my God, I didn't know *that's* what they look like . . . where does it all go when he puts the zipper back up? Oh, God, he wants me to touch it . . . what am I supposed to do? "Oh, Nona, that's so wonderful. I could stay here all night. . . . " Christ, I could have too, but . . .

"Jesus, Miguel, it's not that I don't want to, you know that, but why the hell do we have to do it in the park when you have an apartment. . . . I mean, can't we just go there right now?"

"No, no, if that's how you feel, let's go. I'll get a cab and take you to the subway."

"Please, Miguel, please. . . ."

"Where to, Mac?"

"Please, Miguel. . . ."

"Whatcha say, Mac?"

"Miguel, Miguel. . . ."

"Eighty-six East Twenty-fourth. . . ." Ah, thank God.

It was on the sixth floor of a walk-up. The stairs were spiral and narrow. He had to walk ahead of me and we held

hands. I watched the steps falling behind me as if each was a part of my childishness shed, my virginity, innocence, my life of yesterday. And something up there at the top of the stairs was something I didn't know about yet but I would . . . soon . . . and then it would be too late to ever walk up these stairs again as I was at that moment. I'd be very different in a very important way. Not different-looking or different-acting or different-sounding, but just different. It was very dark but I could see the bed and in a minute I was standing there too embarrassed to face him but not too embarrassed to have gotten undressed . . . and he came over and our hands blindly embraced and we explored each other. I was curious but not *just* curious. I mean I did love him and that made the curiosity all right. At least it made his curiosity all right to me. I didn't mind it. In fact I wanted it. I had wanted it for so long . . . and then we faced each other and I felt that part of him, that strong hard part of him that I could never ever verbalize in my thoughts. It was too personal, so different from the ones on the statues in the Metropolitan or in the anatomy books I used to rummage through. Why should it have to be called something awfully technical, some technical name that applied to every other one in the world, too? It wasn't every other one, or even like them. It was mine . . . and so I'd call it . . . I wasn't sure, and anyway, I wouldn't have to call it anything because I'd always know what I meant. And being with him like that was like being one with something that already was a oneness in itself. It meant we'd never have to be two. Instead of having it be one and one make two it would be one and one make a bigger one . . . and it was pressing against me very hard now and I didn't really know what it was supposed to do. I mean I knew

vaguely because in the park earlier that night, the whole thing had seemed so crazy, I mean actually seeing it and being touched by him and doing it all in the park where I had walked since I was a kid, that another crazy or daring thing wouldn't have mattered much—I mean I couldn't really see where it would do any harm at all except make him laugh at me—but it was worth it. "Miguel, what do they mean when they talk about little boys hurting themselves, you know, playing with themselves, what does it really mean?" So he had shown me . . . right there in the park. So then I knew in a small way what it was supposed to do but how did it do it when there was a woman . . . but he showed me that too, and for the first time since I knew him he said he loved me. And then I knew. . . .

Subways at two in the morning are awfully depressing. . . . One man across from me was drunk and had fallen asleep on the seat and then when the cars jerked he woke up to vomit and then went back to sleep. And the woman at the other end of the car was looking at me . . . maybe she could tell. I knew my hair wasn't up too neatly but for some reason I didn't care. I mean I knew my parents would be in bed when I got back and that was all I had worried about. As for the people on the subway . . . let them know. I think they should know I'm in love and that I'm a woman. A real woman. But I didn't *know* that my parents were in bed, that was it. They could just as well have been waiting up for me and then there was that fear that in some way at some time I'd let it out and they'd know. . . . So going home on that subway was frightening, something the way it was having to go back to Middleton just now.

XIII

When I got back it still wasn't too late to get a lot of studying in, and the trip too had been nice. It was always fun to visit with Herb, and to revisit more or less with Miguel. All he was now, all he could be, was a memory, but one that I didn't want to lose, and rides like this gave me the time and serenity to think back and remember. God, the minute I walk in the damn phone has to ring. . . . Oh, I see, Mrs. Third Floor has not assumed her Sunday afternoon pose near the phone. Oh, I'll take it anyway. It's probably for her so I'll just . . . "Hello. . . . Oh, yes, hello, Mrs. McKenna, how do you feel? . . . No, I haven't eaten yet. . . . Well, not much. I was just going to start now. My exam is. . . . Sure, what time do you want me to pick you up? . . . All right then, I'll see you at seven-thirty."

There is no time to study. I have to be dressed and over at Mrs. McKenna's by seven-thirty. That leaves me two hours. . . . What can I do in two hours? . . . Hell, I'll put the Italian off until the morning when I don't have Mrs. McKenna on my mind. Now I have too much to do. I have to start thinking about why she called, why she wants to have dinner with me, and how lucky I am to have such a good excuse for not studying. I mean who in his right mind would refuse an invitation to take Mrs. McKenna out for

dinner? My God, she did ask me to take her out, didn't she? Wonder if I have enough money. Oh, I'll take the whole summer's savings just for fun. Who would ever refuse Mrs. McKenna simply because of some little exam that one would never remember or think about again? Well, certainly not I. I would accept regardless; besides, I damn well need a good excuse. I can't face that damn stuff in any frame of mind . . . I am just not in an Italian mood. I guess I haven't been all summer, simply because it was the one credit course, the one thing I had any responsibility for, the one *must* of the whole eight weeks.

I rang Apartment 4-C and stood downstairs in the lobby waiting. When the elevator door opened I saw her walk out and then instead of walking toward me she disappeared off to the side, and then I saw her thin, trembling hand gripping the door frame and she appeared, paler than before and groping with her hand for something to grasp on the wall but all she found was its flat surface, so she held her hand out to me. I took it and we didn't say anything. Then in the car she told me she was tired. Somehow I think she expected me to believe that. Having drunk all night and all morning and all afternoon and not being able to walk she thought I'd believe her if she told me she was only tired.

Before she ordered her omelet she ordered three Manhattans and when she tried to light her own cigarette—she wouldn't let me do it until she had tried herself—she dropped the match on my lap and it melted a large area in my only drip-dry skirt. But she didn't know, or particularly care. "Look at that nice Indian boy over there, looks lonely, don't you think, Nona? Ask him to join us, all right? Go ahead, go over and ask him to sit with me."

I asked him to join us, which he did eagerly.

"Good, I'm so glad you came over."

"Oh, it was nice of you to ask me. It can get pretty lonely eating alone night after night."

"Yes, I know, there are many lonely people in the world. . . . Are you a summer student?"

"I'm what you call a foreign exchange student for the summer."

"Oh, I see."

"And you, you look like one, too, but I haven't seen you at the International House."

"No, I'm not a student." She laughed nervously.

"She is Professor Evelyn Gordon McKenna," I proudly informed him in an excessively determined and snobbish tone. And she was glad but wouldn't let me know it.

"Oh, of course, you give the Poetic Drama course. I've heard much about you, Professor. Say, I've always wanted to know . . ."

"No. Don't ask me anything about the poetic drama. I don't know anything about it. Never heard of it before. I don't have a mind, you know. Why don't you talk to us, eh? Tell us about Nehru. Let me see, tell us, well, tell us if the Indians think Nehru is good-looking. Don't you think he's good-looking?"

The young Indian boy was embarrassed and looked into his food.

"I bet Nona does, don't you, Nona?"

I forced a smile and stared at the boy.

"Waiter, another Manhattan. Did ya hear me, Louis? I want a big, big Manhattan. Well, what was I saying? Oh, yes, Nehru, well, tell me, what do you think of him?"

"Well, we, my friends and I, we don't agree with the government's . . ."

"Oh, umm, I see, that's fine. But let's not talk about that just now, all right? I'm too tired."

Mrs. McKenna was too tired. Too tired to eat, too tired to talk, too tired to think, but she wasn't too tired to drink. To drink and drink and drink . . . It was a lucky thing I had brought the whole summer's savings "for fun." I mean it was a good thing I brought it, but it wasn't for fun.

"Let's get out of here, Nona. I can't stand it any more. You don't have to support me, Nona, I'm not an invalid. Don't touch me! . . . Nona, darling, let's go up to my place for a while."

There was no saying no. I couldn't even say yes. I just had to do what she said when she said it. Hold me one minute, don't touch me the next. It was all the same. I mean it was all inconsistent and peremptory and I couldn't do a thing about it. If I had left her just then, I mean I never in my life would have, but if I had left her just then she would have passed out, been picked up by the cops, and put in the "booby hatch," as she would call it. I couldn't do anything—just abide and endure and see what would happen. I mean, Christ, besides loving her and pitying her with all the pity I could possibly spare, she was still Professor McKenna. I hadn't forgotten that and I never would.

She sat down. I mean she fell into that wicker chair in her apartment and seemed utterly miserable. "Nona, oh, Nona, you know what I need right now? Do you, Nona, do you know? I need a nice big glass of beer. Get me some, would you?"

"I'll get it right away, Mrs. McKenna. But you can't do

this to yourself. You can't go on like this." Her arm was on the back of the chair and gesturing with it to suggest clearing the air, of me, I guess, she swept it past her, and my face happened to be in its path. I'm sure she never meant to hit me. She just would never have done that, but she did it whether she had meant to or not.

"Don't bother me . . . leave me alone . . . it's just a period I have to go through . . . oh, this beer is just what I needed. This fatigue is terrible, you know, Nona, just terrible. . . . Oh, now what shall we do? . . . Nona, why don't you call Carla up and ask her if we could drop in. We can take her all that stuff in the 'frige from the party last night and those flowers . . . she'll just love those flowers."

I guess she didn't remember that "those flowers" were from me. But later when she did remember she remembered with a sort of taken-for-granted assumption that I had wanted Carla to have the flowers—perhaps that was really why I had bought them in the first place. Carla was her most brilliant graduate student who had a little baby and whose husband was a professor. They weren't very well off by any means but certainly not as indigent as Evelyn McKenna seemed to think. She always assumed that they had to beg for food or milk or anything that they might need. So tonight she decided to bestow upon her all the food in her "frige" and every perishable thing in her apartment. She couldn't stand the chaos of her place, those crates and cartons, so Carla's place was an understandable escape.

We started to the elevator. I was carrying three shopping bags bulging with cans, cakes, rolls, meats, and cleansers while Mrs. McKenna was trying desperately to keep hold of the vase in which were all those beautiful flowers. She had to

put them down in the elevator and she leaned on me, inadvertently pushing me to the wall and making me squeeze a milk container sufficiently to break it—so we left a puddle of white stuff all over the elevator and every time the shopping bags rubbed against me they squeaked with the wetness of my skirt. But we had a few yards to walk to get to the car and I couldn't hold three bags plus Mrs. McKenna. She wouldn't let me put the bags down and help her, I mean she didn't want it to seem as though I were helping her so she'd pretend she could walk . . . then I'd gather up the bags again and then she would lean on me again and I'd have to put the bags down and . . . and it went on that way until . . . Well, until I heard the vase crash and saw the flowers all over the sidewalk and Mrs. McKenna leaning over the railing around the little shrubs in front of her apartment and sparkling little objects near her feet. They seemed beautiful until I saw the blood on her leg and on some of the little sparkling pieces of glass. "I can't go on, I just can't." So I dropped the bags; that took care of the other container of milk. And she put her arms around my neck and leaned on my back and somehow we got into the car and somehow we got to Carla's and somehow we got inside.

Carla didn't seem too surprised. I was more surprised at her than she was at Mrs. McKenna. After a couple of hours of her reading sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ballads, especially "Edward, Edward" which she repeated several times with her overly forced Irish accent, Mrs. McKenna said, "Nona, do you think we should go home? Huh, do you, Nona?"

"Yes, Mrs. McKenna, it's late. Maybe we should."

"Well, I like that. I don't think it's very nice at all. Do you, Carla dear? I just don't think it's very nice of you, Nona, to tell me that I should go home. How would you like to be told to go home, Nona? That certainly wasn't nice at all," but she was getting up while she was saying all that and with Carla's help collapsed on the front seat of the car and we were off. I didn't quite know to where. "Do you like to swim, Nona? . . . Good. Why don't we go to Winslow Lake? Closed? No, it couldn't be. Well, we'll go anyway."

So I left her in the car in front of her place and ran up to get her bathing suit.

"Do you have a suit, Nona?" she asked when I got back to the car. I said yes because I had one at the apartment, but I guess she thought I meant in the car.

"Mrs. McKenna, we'll stop off at my place so you can change" and, I thought, so I can get my suit. I mean actually I had no intention of swimming and certainly not of letting her. But I couldn't say no just then. When we got to the water then I could, especially since I knew Winslow Lake was well-patrolled and the police would stop her if I couldn't.

"No, no, we don't have to go to your place. I'll change right here in the car," and she grabbed at the collar of that green tunic dress and pulled but it didn't come loose. I mean it couldn't, since it buttoned up to the neck. "I can't even get my dress off, Nona. I think it's because I need another drink. Why don't we just park and we can walk over to the Concord. I hope they haven't had enough of me. Did I do anything bad before? . . . Are you sure? . . . All right then, let's go."

It was a Manhattan and then a big turkey sandwich which got no attention except for the bacon strips. She

pulled them out, held them up as if for inspection, stationed her open mouth directly under her hand and let go. Sometimes the bacon would land in her mouth but usually not.

"Louis, your name *is* Louis, isn't it? . . . Good, I thought so. Louis, you know this is the last time I'll be here. What do you know about that, Nona, he doesn't believe me. Tell him, Nona. Really, Louis, I'm going to Europe . . . but I *am*. George, *you* believe me, don't you? Tell Louis that I'm really going. . . . No, she's not going with me, she's just a friend. . . . My daughter? No, just my . . . but, Louis, since I'm going to Europe don't you think you should kiss me good-by? Here, let me kiss you then."

"Come on, lady, you've got the wrong man."

"Just one kiss, Louis."

"It's time for you to go, Professor, you're tired now."

"I'll go if you kiss me, just one kiss, Louis. It's been so long since anyone's kissed me . . . please, Louis."

"Oh, God, kiss her for God's sake."

"If you're so anxious, kiss her yourself, George."

"Louis, for my sake could you please just kiss her once and we'll go? I'll take her out as soon as you kiss her just once."

"Oh, thank you, Louis. I'll remember that when I'm in Europe. Good-by. Nona, let's go. Nona, did you see Louis kiss me? Maybe he didn't mind me. I think he really didn't mind me.

"No, *no*, Nona, we don't *have* to get into the car. I *live* right over there. . . . To *your* apartment? . . . You mean to sleep? . . . Oh, all right, dear, all right."

It was the only night all summer that I couldn't find a place in front of my apartment. I had to park about three blocks away and it took over an hour to walk those three

blocks. First we tried just holding arms but then the side of her that I wasn't holding would sink and then her whole body would begin to sink and we'd both end up sprawled on the sidewalk. The best way to walk was for her to put her arms around my neck from the back and just lean with all her weight and sort of let herself be dragged, but it wasn't easy and we fell often. Once she bruised herself—a bad scraping of her knee—but it didn't seem to hurt and we couldn't stop about it. And about three yards from my door she collapsed over a hydrant.

"I can't go on, I just can't."

"But, Mrs. McKenna, it's only a few more steps."

"Don't coerce me, Nona, just don't coerce me. I'm staying here tonight, right here on this lovely hydrant. Do you mind if I stay with you tonight?" She asked the hydrant, and probably deciding that the lesser of the two evils was to come with me, she tried again and we finally made it.

I was tired. I mean my body was tired but somehow my nerves had been so titillated by the walk that I forgot that my arm ached and my back felt broken and my mind could think only of her. What to do and, most important, how to do it, and what to say.

She fell into a large red butterfly chair in front of a dull, small lamp which I had left burning. "Turn off that goddamn archetype," she shouted, shielding her eyes and collapsing back in the chair. "God, I'm becoming a victim of my own terminology, that's awful." She seemed to have passed out but when I touched her forehead with the washcloth she shook her head and asked me to sing to her, arias from Mozart. The only Mozart aria I knew well was *Dove sono i bei momenti*, and since she understood Italian I hesitated to

sing it but I guess she wasn't very aware of the words. And anyway I tried to mutter them as softly as I could. I mean I'm sure she often wondered where her beautiful moments had gone, or whether she had ever had any, and why should I remind her just then? But she didn't mind and wanted more. But everything I knew was either *Con onore muore* or *Addio del passato*, either some kind of death wish or tragic farewell which I was afraid she couldn't take just then. But the tunes were soothing to her, and before I had finished she was asleep.

When I had her bed ready I gently woke her and helped her into the bedroom. Nothing was said. She tore off her dress, this time breaking off the buttons, and when I turned around that green tunic dress which had once appeared at the foot of my bed in a vision was there now, but in a wrinkled heap, and Mrs. McKenna, Mrs. Evelyn Gordon McKenna, was lying naked on my bed, naked except for her bra. I thought she was asleep, and when I saw her nakedness I was so embarrassed, for myself and for her, I mean, how would she feel if she knew, that I grabbed the sheet and flung it over her, but she wasn't asleep and flung it off again. And I went in to lie on the couch in the living room.

The night seemed interminable. Actually it was only a couple of hours before I fell asleep, but I never thought I would. And as soon as I did, or so it seemed, I heard a little rustling in the kitchen. The bathroom light was on—I had left it on for her—and I staggered into the kitchen blinded by the light and by sleep and saw her sitting in the kitchen chair, still naked, reading her short story, the one she had given me at her party and which I had left on the bureau.

"Hello," she said sweetly, pridefully, almost like the way

she said it that very first day in her office. "This story isn't bad, you know, not bad at all."

"Is there anything you'd like, Professor McKenna?" God, but it was strange calling this naked, beaten figure "Professor." But I always would, because the title was about all she had just now and she needed it more than ever.

"Yes, dear, I'd love some beer."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I just don't have anything like that."

"Well, then, I guess I'll have to have water. Don't bother about me, Nona, I often walk about at night. Just go to bed . . . I'll be all right."

I felt terrible having to tell her that I didn't have any beer. It was denying her something and I felt I had no right to do that, even if I *had* to by necessity. So after she went to sleep I ran out into the hall and called Ellen. "Ellen, I'm awfully sorry to wake you but Mrs. McKenna is here and, well, I can't go into it now but it's an emergency. Do you think you could get some wine or beer over here by six or seven in the morning? . . . No, I can't go. I can't leave her alone. Would you, Ellen? . . . Oh, thanks *so* much. Really, I can't tell you how grateful I am. I'll do something for you as soon as I can. You'll never know how important this is."

I didn't either. I mean I really didn't realize then just how important it would all become. And at six-thirty Ellen left the beer and the wine—she brought both—outside the door in the hall. I almost couldn't wait for Mrs. McKenna to wake up so I could tell her I had some now.

XIV

I knew what was going to happen, and I was right. She was so embarrassed in the morning that she could do nothing but get dressed, assume a most hostile attitude, and act as though she had a million things to do that day and couldn't waste another moment in my company. She *had* a million things to do—that part was true. She had to see a dentist and a doctor for her European shots. And that's why she was so anxious, so terribly tense that she couldn't sit still, couldn't eat, couldn't speak except in short, quick, apologetic phrases with a pathetic whine in the tone, as if to say, I'm perfectly all right this morning, Nona, thanks for your hospitality, but I've got to run since I have so much to attend to. I've got to dash out right now but, Nona, don't let me go. Tell me I should stay. Tell me you want me to stay. Stay with me, Nona, because really I don't have a damn thing to do today except a couple of doctors' appointments which I can't see through in this condition but, Nona, if you don't do something for me, no one will. Nona, please Nona . . . but, well, I've got to run now, Nona, you know I'm a busy woman.

I mean that's about what she would have said if she had bothered to say anything. But that sad, sad face with the large eyes somewhat slanted downward as if weighted down by the problems that were nesting right above her eyes, and

the tightly-drawn mouth that almost never smiled said more than she could ever have said with words. And the heat . . . it was worse than it had been all summer. The apartment was hot, I thought, until I had to go out to get some milk and nearly passed out under the weight of the heavy, soggy heat. So I told her what she wanted to hear. I told her that it was too hot to go out, that the apartment was actually cool, and that I'd love her to stay, and without saying anything I handed her a large glass of beer, so she sat down in the butterfly chair and drank and then I knew she'd be staying for a while because no one can get out of the butterfly chair even when he's sober, and she wasn't going to be sober for a long, long time. That much I knew.

She made a shopping list for me, including three six-packs, a pinch bottle of Scotch, and lots of ice. It was the first shopping list I had ever seen without any food on it. It was sort of like a report card without any marks on it. Not that it hasn't been done before that someone goes out just to buy alcohol, but it was the way she sent me. Go over to Joe's Delicatessen, she had said, and get some food, and while you're out get some whisky, but don't bother getting any food for me because I'm not hungry.

And finally I got the whisky and got the ice and managed to pour a glassful and managed to sit down in the chair across from the butterfly chair with some orange juice in my hand, and waited. What was I supposed to say? Here I had invited her to stay for the day and I had nothing to say. Do you think she'd like me to say something about *Endymion*? No, I think she'd prefer to talk about Coleridge or perhaps . . .

"Nona, you know I'm not at all sure you want me to stay here."

"Oh, but I do, Mrs. McKenna."

"Do you really, Nona? Tell me, do you really? Just assure me, just say it once. Just tell me that you really want me to stay."

"I really want you to stay, Mrs. McKenna."

"All right, Nona, I'll stay then. That's very nice of you and I'll stay . . . I'll stay right here in this nice, wonderful chair. Could you get me a little more, dear?"

Now what? If I ask her about *Endymion* she'll know how little I understood all summer. Maybe I'd better call Bob and he could give me a list of questions that I can ask her whenever the conversation, that at the moment nonexistent conversation, lags . . . but maybe . . .

"Would you like me to tell you something, Nona?" . . . Joy . . .

"Oh, yes, Mrs. McKenna, please do. Yes, go right ahead."

"All right then. One summer, it was right after a semester in Wisconsin, one of my graduate students, such a beautiful boy . . . we lived together that summer in a cottage in New Hampshire. Steve was just a baby, eight maybe, and Paul taught him how to shoot and hunt and . . . and I wrote that summer and then they'd come back from the hunting and we'd eat dinner. I'd cook the dinner . . . and I had everything that summer . . . I was happy then . . . then . . . that summer. And then when the fall semester started again in Wisconsin . . . Steve had grown so fond of Paul . . . but back in Wisconsin he fell in love with a young, beautiful girl, so I had to leave the college. Well, you didn't expect me to intrude when he found a younger woman, did you, Nona?

I gave him all his experience and all his awareness and all his writing talent . . . that's what I gave him, and I gave him myself every night, even when I didn't want to, even when I was too tired and even when I wasn't well. I gave myself to him every night because he was young and needed it every night. And sometimes, even in the afternoons when I'd be writing, he'd come in from chopping wood and want to go to bed before dinner and sometimes I'd just lie there. He'd enjoy himself and I wouldn't, but because he needed me just then I'd go with him. That's all. I just gave him myself, and he took it all and then found someone younger who would go to bed with him after morning coffee, before afternoon tea, again before cocktails, and then all night long. But you know, Nona, I didn't drink at all that summer. Not once all summer. But then when he found that young one I had to drink and then I had to leave the college. I already said that, didn't I? Oh, God, I don't have a mind today. Dr. Smythe, Nona, what about Dr. Smythe? Did you cancel the appointment? . . . Oh, good, Nona, that's fine. And Dr. Goodwin too? . . . Fine, fine."

Jesus, what would Ellen think if she knew? If she knew that here in my apartment, right here in my own butterfly chair was Mrs. McKenna talking about herself. Monday . . . it *was* Monday. My last day to study before the exam. . . . Maybe if Mrs. McKenna took a nap I could . . .

"Nona, you know, I'm not the least bit tired. Isn't that amazing? I'm really not tired. . . . Well, here we are. . . . Why don't you let me hear some of the tapes of the lectures? . . . But that's not *my* voice, is it? . . . Is it really, Nona? . . . I can't believe it. Do I sound like that? I have to admit that my accent does sound awfully put on, at least there. Does it

really sound that put on, Nona? Hmm? Does it? . . . Good, because I don't like to sound affected. Well, I'm *not* affected, so I shouldn't sound it. Anyway, Nona, I'd like to record some poetry. Would you like that? Would you like me to record poetry for you? Hmm? All the poetry that you've been asking for all summer?"

So we took out the recorder and she played with it like a toy all day. Recording a poem, then listening to it played back ten times, sometimes fifteen, enough times to start thinking that she was terrific and that the recordings were good enough to sell to the radio. But that was the day, or was it the night? . . . That was the trouble, I never knew when it was day or when it was night. We kept the drapes closed because the sun was so hot, so the apartment was always pretty dark, and we never slept. I mean she never slept unless she passed out and that could happen any time, not necessarily at night. Sometimes she slept from three to seven in the morning, sometimes from two to six in the evening—and if I didn't go outside and didn't look at the sun I never would have known what time of day, or night, it was, so I don't know if it was that day or that night, but whenever it was that she recorded that stuff and she thought she was so great, she suffered terribly. I mean the next day, or at least some twenty-four hours or so later when she relistened to her voice and hadn't yet started on that day's bottles, she realized how terrible she sounded and wanted to destroy the tapes, but instead of destroying them she tried to destroy me by telling me that it was all my fault that she sounded so terrible on the tapes and that she was not going to waste her time and talents any more if I couldn't do something about making

the tapes sound better and who the hell did I think I was for producing tapes that sounded like that? . . . So we put the recorder away for a while.

The thing I most wanted to know about was her husband, and the first time she mentioned him—something like "Steve never knew his father, you know"—I felt as though I was superior to everyone in the world because I knew that intimate fact about Mrs. McKenna, that her son had never known his father. But I wasn't satisfied to know that much more than everyone else. I wanted to know even more than that. I wanted to know why, and I didn't have to ask. I never had to ask her anything. If I only thought it, only wished it to myself, somehow she got the message, and within minutes of my wondering about something she'd start talking about it. I don't know whether it was because I was beginning to get to know her and beginning to expect what she was going to say and that it wasn't that I was wishing to hear it at all but simply that I was thinking I was going to hear it, or whether there *was* some terribly mystic, psychic relation between us.

He had been a longshoreman. She had met him in a bar. His name was Steve, too, but somehow when she'd say it and mean *him*, it would sound different. You could almost tell by her tone which Steve she was talking about. Anyway, she had had nowhere to go that night, that night when she met him in the bar, so where-else-had-I-to-go-Nona? She stayed at his place in Soho for several weeks, not even a month, and they got married. She was nineteen.

Three months later, after he had left her and she knew she was pregnant, she got a job in a Soho nursery school but the baby came early and she got very sick. She said

she was lying in her hospital bed, a little dopey from the anesthesia, when Steve came in in a drunken rage. He wanted his son. He tore her sheet off the bed, thinking the baby was under it. An attendant made him leave. She was scared, she said, so scared that when she finally got out with the baby she moved in with a friend and had the shutters nailed. Her friend, Enid, took almost complete care of the baby so that Evelyn could get stronger. And one night while Enid had the baby at the doctor's for a shot and Evelyn was trying to catch up on sleep, Steve crashed in through the bedroom window with a hammer in his hand. He tried to kill her. She said he tried to strangle her, and beat her. He didn't use the hammer, but he used his belt. He wanted his baby. She didn't tell me any more than that, and she said she never, ever saw or heard of him again.

So I learned why Steve had never seen his father, why the sign in the lobby read "Mrs. E. G. McKenna." From the story, rather the stories, because the same story got told about six times during those seven days of living together and never in the same way twice. . . . God, it *was* seven days of living together and now, well, now it must be Tuesday because the restaurant across the street is closed and it's always closed on Tuesdays, and it must be about eleven because the sun is over near the chapel and it's always near the chapel when I have Chaucer and I always had Chaucer at eleven. So it's Tuesday and it's eleven and my Italian exam was at ten-thirty. So I've failed Italian. Who would ever reproach me for yielding to this pitiful, beaten figure and sacrificing my summer's grades? "Sacrificing" . . . I'll have to remember to use that word when I have to explain it all

to everyone. That's such a wonderful excuse word; no one would see through it. No one would see that if it hadn't been Mrs. McKenna it would have been something else. I would have had to have had an accident, or gotten sick, or found someone else to need me just in time, in time to avoid the exam. Maybe Herb would know, though. He always knew those things. But thank God not everyone was like Herb, not everyone would really understand.

But I don't mean to say that my avoiding the exam was more important than Mrs. McKenna's needing me. Nothing was more important than being needed. To achieve the success of being needed by Mrs. McKenna was far more than the success of getting an A in Italian. So in my estimation I had been successful in the biggest undertaking of the summer, the biggest quest I had ever undertaken. It was true. I had never yearned for anything or needed anyone the way I needed Mrs. McKenna after that first lecture when I nearly fell out of my seat. I had needed her from that time on because I knew just by looking at her that she needed me. I mean I *did* need her to *like* me, and I needed her to accept me, especially accept me, because that was one thing I was sure she'd never do, being such an enormous mind and all, but from the very beginning I was sure that *she* would be needing something. That sad face just cried out with need, but I wasn't sure exactly what the need was for. I had hoped very much that it was a need for love and compassion and I had wondered during the hot, lonely, wakeful nights and during the lectures in the hot classrooms how I would ever be able to show her that I could offer her that love and compassion.

And now here she was needing me. Not anyone but *me*. So who could possibly say that the summer had been a waste?

But I was still anxious to know about her Catholicism. In class she had always made a point of it. "But as you know, and although I'm Irish, I'm a Catholic convert, so take this with that in mind," she would say when talking about Blake's sense of God. And I wanted to know about it, but all she told me was that once in England on a temporary teaching job—that was another thing, all her teaching jobs were temporary, sometimes only for one semester—but anyway, in England at one time she suddenly woke up one morning and knew what was missing and knew what the answer was, so she had run through rain for several miles to the nearest cathedral and crawled on her hands and knees to the priest from whom she begged for a baptism which the priest, so taken by her situation and the urgency of her plea, performed with no hesitation of signature or recital of catechism.

So Mrs. McKenna had become a Catholic convert, but she never went to church. Only once, after Paul had left her, that summer of writing and hunting and sex. But she was a Catholic, so I had to start reading about Catholicism and if it had meant more to her, because honestly, after a while I began to think that it didn't mean anything to her, but if it had I would have converted right then, that day, or was it night, and then we could have said rosaries together and prayed and sorrowed mutually because we would have been one in God's sight.

But there was no God and she didn't give a damn about it and anyway she seemed to have an affinity for Jews.

Paul had been one and whoever the man was that she'd been carrying on with in Middleton was and . . . well, anyway, she seemed to have a special thing for Jews, so I might as well make the most of it. That man in Middleton, Sam somebody-or-other, he was the wonderful cause of Mrs. McKenna's being in my apartment just now. All summer long he had planned that they would celebrate the end of classes together, and he had promised her a champagne celebration. In order to prepare for the champagne, Mrs. McKenna had had to get off the Antabuse tablets six days before the packing-up party, and I guess she thought, I mean she hoped, that she'd be able to get right back on them again but then there was the party and then the night with me and the hydrant and then . . . then a blur of days of sitting in my apartment drinking and talking . . . and talking . . . and talking.

XV

But finally one day we just had to pull ourselves together. It made her feel much better to say *we* had to pull ourselves together, and get over to her place and get it ready for the movers.

But before we went I had had to run down to the campus, to one of the old, cool, musty old bookshops that was buying back all the books I had bought there. I had to sell a couple of books each day to pay for the liquor and food, and now with the movers to pay, Mrs. McKenna never seemed to have any money, so I just had to sell every last book for which I could get anything at all.

Her apartment was so chaotic that she collapsed with fatigue just looking at the work ahead of us. This of course lessened the work ahead of *us* since I was left to do it until she felt strong enough to get up again, which was always after I had done the bulk of the work. But she helped. She'd take one basket out to the incinerator and then collapse with a can of beer until she mustered up enough strength to carry out another bundle of things. But what seemed to be more fatiguing than carrying things or moving things or pushing and lifting was the emotional pushing of one's self from one place to another place, especially a place of uncertainty. Mrs. McKenna had no

idea where she was going from here. She was to go to New York when the lease ran out, a couple of days hence, and then get passage for Europe. Europe was her destination. Not Le Havre or Paris or Rome, but Europe. And if anyone suggested that Europe was a large place and asked just where she was planning to go, she'd get flustered and wring her hands and say she didn't know. She was going to Europe and eventually Greece, but she didn't want to be bothered with plans until the day she'd buy passage. Then she'd begin to think about it. So no one knew, not even Mrs. McKenna, and since the prospect of the future was so terrifying she found solace in the past.

"This is a picture of Grandma Gordon, Nona. You know, the one I mentioned in lectures, the one that smoked the clay pipe . . . and here is my father on the street in Dublin where we lived when I was very young. You know what, Nona? I used to dream at night that I was a little green leprechaun and that when everyone else was asleep I'd go searching for the golden treasure and . . ." and she drifted into talking about her doctors' appointments and her stomach-ache as though she hadn't been talking about leprechauns at all . . . and the past became the present and she was a leprechaun again, and the present became the past and she wasn't the professor any more, and then the past became the present again and stayed the present almost for the rest of the time we remained in Middleton.

Then I had to take my Blake portfolio to sell. That was one of the only things I had decided never to sell, absolutely never. But we were leaving Middleton in three days and we had no money for gas or food or movers or anything. The portfolio was a copy of the same edition I had given

Mrs. McKenna earlier in the summer at which time I was carrying traveler's checks, supposedly enough for the whole eight weeks, and had felt so rich that I'd started spending all of the checks the first week, especially on the two Blake books. They had cost me ninety dollars. Forty-five dollars each. And now the damn man in the bookstore said he couldn't give me more than five for mine.

"But it's a limited edition, sir, and . . ."

"But we have to make a profit, you know, and not many people . . ."

"Oh, sir, please, it's such a beautiful book and I paid so much for it. It's practically new. It really is. . . . Look, not a sign of wear."

"I'm sorry, young lady, but we simply don't get interest in this type of book. Students don't seem to be able to spend that kind of money."

"But it's a limited edition, hand-colored on vellum. Wouldn't you buy it for yourself?"

Then he began getting nasty. He didn't want the book himself and he wouldn't pay more than five dollars. I had no choice and he knew it. That's why he was being so impossible. So it was five dollars only because it had to be. Only because I couldn't realize then that five dollars could have been found somewhere else, somehow. It could have been found with Mrs. McKenna if I had only had the courage to ask her for it, but I couldn't. She was like a little wet kitten and I couldn't have asked her for anything. I knew that I'd never be able to get that book back for less than sixty dollars. . . . I suddenly hated the man and all his books and started seeing him as a means for making fast money, for gypping students, and I wished and wished

that I had never taken my Blake off its shelf. That I had never mixed it up in the dirty, bartering, grabbing world of business. But I finally took the man's five dollars, although it was barely enough to pay for the turnpike home.

But Mrs. McKenna cashed a check and we had forty dollars, enough for one day. But there were three days left.

Somehow, I don't remember just how, those three days passed, stranger than any days had ever been for me before. The kind of terribly burdensome, terrifying, tortuous days that carried with their pain a certain beauty that one wanted never to forget. *I* knew *I* never wanted to forget them . . . the night she called me at two-thirty to record Baudelaire and I could hardly walk and could hardly speak, my throat was so parched from fright and fatigue, fright of her dying and sometimes, I do think, fright of my own collapse, because those nights and days, those hours running into hours running into hours were tiring to the body, but the body can rest. It was the nerves that were getting no rest and which I was afraid would give in. But they didn't, and I answered her call and we recorded Baudelaire.

She had always wanted to be an actress, always had tried in auditions at college and had never quite made it. But now she let go. The years that she hadn't acted were all tied up in that night, in her readings of Baudelaire and Dante, and occasionally she would get so involved with her own histrionics and showmanship that she'd lose sight of the poetry and start making jokes about it and punning until she'd realize what she had been reading and then she'd scream at me for not having any respect for the masters. But after several tapes she was too tired to bother

with the pronunciation and finally, after having finished three six-packs and a bottle of Chianti, she went to the bedroom with a glass of diluted Scotch and finally fell asleep sometime in the morning. She was very funny that way. She knew she'd finish the bottle of Scotch that night, diluted or not, but somehow she just felt less guilty, felt as if she were making more of an effort to help herself, if she diluted it. But while she was diluting Scotch for hours we had a talk.

Jesus, I hate that expression "we had a talk." I guess that's because of the very first "talk" I ever had. It was right before I was to enter kindergarten. Helen, who at that time was a little ahead of herself and in the fifth grade, was adamant about my learning the facts of life before I'd be thrown in with a lot of kids who would start talking about storks and things and confuse me. So she suggested to her parents who suggested to mine that they do something about it. But they wouldn't. I was too young. They wouldn't. The fact is that they couldn't. They couldn't have spoken about sex to me any more easily then than they could have two years later or two years after that or even two years after that. They just could never have talked about sex, so they used my age for the excuse. So Helen had come up to my room with a little book about growing up and had sat on my bed and had had me read it aloud. I had just learned to read. I mean I wasn't very proficient at it or anything, so she had no right to get so upset about it, but that's because she was almost as embarrassed as my parents would have been and she needed an excuse, too, so just because she didn't use the one about my being too young she had to use the one about my reading. I mean

I started reading out loud and the arrangement was that if I got to something I didn't understand I should tell her and she'd explain it. Well, that didn't quite work out because whatever I didn't understand I'd be too embarrassed to ask about. Anyway, after we got through the chapters about bees and plants and birds we finally got to human beings. There weren't any pictures, so of course I had no way of knowing what any of the words meant, especially that one unmentionable word. Sometimes I can't believe that I ever got to be six years old without ever having heard the word "penis." But I had. And when I came to it in the reading, of course I pronounced it wrong. "Pen" was a word I knew so of course I pronounced the word like pen and she corrected me, and asked if I knew what it meant. I kind of knew that it would end up meaning something pretty serious so I said yes, that I knew what it meant, and then we got to it a second time and I mispronounced it again and she took the book, I mean she grabbed it, slammed it shut, said that since I wasn't taking it seriously she wasn't going to waste her time, and left the house, slamming the door behind her, and I didn't see her for weeks after that. So our talk was over. That had been my first sexual lesson.

But now I had to have a talk with Mrs. McKenna . . . oh, yes, I was supposed to start calling her "Evelyn"; she had asked me to, but it was so hard to change. Sometimes I'd call her "Mrs. McKenna" and sometimes "Evelyn," but soon I was calling her "Evelyn" and couldn't remember ever having called her anything else. It was now Friday night, and we were supposed to leave on Monday. I had called my mother during the day to tell her about Evelyn,

to explain why I hadn't written, and to say that I'd be home on Monday. I guess I had gotten pretty dramatic, talking about how I thought Mrs. McKenna wasn't going to live very long, not very long at all, and explaining about how I had had to miss my exam. I called her, I told her, because she was the only person, the only sane person I had been able to talk to since Evelyn had moved in with me. I hadn't been able to talk to anyone in Middleton except of course Ellen, whose confidence I trusted so deeply, because everyone knew Mrs. McKenna and would have talked. "Talk" isn't the word for it. They would have made such a scandal out of it that Evelyn would never have been able to return to Middleton or face any of her colleagues again. So I had called Mother because she'd sympathize and understand and say something comforting. She did, but I guess I had worried her, especially when I had said that about Evelyn's dying soon. I guess I had made it sound pretty imminent, so she had spoken to my father about it. I found that out while I was having that talk with Evelyn.

She had said that evening, "If I'm not off the booze by tomorrow, darling, maybe you'd better take me to a hospital. They can help me and it only takes a couple of days . . . but no, dear, don't do it without asking me." Her brow wrinkled and she grasped my hand violently. "You wouldn't, would you, Nona?"

"Evelyn, you know I wouldn't. Anyway, I think you're doing fine. You're going to be fine in just a few more days." And she agreed, but as if she wasn't quite sure herself. She thought that with my help she'd be able to get off it herself and that by Monday she'd be strong enough to go

back to New York, though she'd prefer that I drive and she would leave her car in Middleton. Steve could come up for it. Damn prig. He'd come up for the car, but he'd never come up for her. Suddenly I realized that it had never occurred to me once all that week to call and tell Steve about his mother. Nor had she mentioned him. So we decided then that "we'd" work together and get her off the booze and drive down to New York together on Monday, dropping her off at Steve's. So she asked me to call Steve to see if Monday was all right. She couldn't walk out to the hall, so I called; I left the apartment door open so that she could hear.

"Steve, this is Nona Greene, you know, from Middleton . . . Oh, fine, thank you. Say, Steve, you know classes were over last week and well, your mother wasn't feeling very well, so she's been living with me. . . . Drinking? What do you mean? . . . Well, yes, Steve, she's been drinking." . . . and from the doorway, "Shhhhh, Nona, no, no." . . . "But she's fine now and wants to know if she's welcome if we come down on Monday. . . . No, Steve, she can't come to the phone. . . . But she can't, Steve, she's exhausted."

But Steve insisted, in his pompous, bombastic manner, that his mother come to the phone or else he wouldn't let her in when we got to New York. So Evelyn guessed what was being said and in her bra, with a dish towel unsuccessfully draped about her waist, she staggered out into the hall, and catching her before she fell down the stairs to the basement, I helped her to the phone and held her up while she spoke. "Steve, hello, darling. . . . No, I'm fine now. Nona's been just wonderful. We're coming down on Monday,

Steve, is that all right? . . . No, I'm not drunk, Steve, I'm just very tired. . . . You mean I'm not welcome? . . . All right, Steve, I understand. . . . Darling, do you love me? . . . Steve? . . . Steve? . . ."

And that was one of the first times I ever saw her sob. "He didn't even say he loved me. Nona, do you think he loves me? He didn't even say it. He wouldn't answer me when I asked him if he loved me. Nobody loves me, nobody. I'm just an old sot and nobody loves me. . . . Oh, I know *you* do, Nona, but I mean *really*, nobody loves me. Nona, you know what he said when I asked him if he loved me? He said, 'We love you worlds, Mother, when you're not drunk.' That's his wonderful psychology, making me feel unloved when I'm drunk so I'll want to get sober. Oh, *damn* him. . . . But maybe he's right, Nona, you know?"

So we sat together, quietly crying to ourselves. Her tears were from disgust with herself, sorrow about her son, and fear about the monstrous task ahead of her the next couple of days, getting off the booze. And my tears? . . . well, it was difficult. As much as I loved Evelyn and as much as I wanted her to get well and strong, I was scared. I knew that when she'd be sober we'd never be able to recapture what we had had these last days. She'd never want to sit for hours holding my hand and talking about the past and she'd never need me again. And maybe not even want me. Maybe she wouldn't even want me around to remind her of her terrible weakness and dependency.

So there we were, sitting together, each crying for very different reasons. It was getting awfully late but . . . "Nona, do you have change? . . . Well, I want you to go back out there and call Steve again and ask him if he loves me."

"Oh, Evelyn, of course he loves you. You know that. You know that that's why he's being this way, because he feels it's the only way he knows of helping you to help yourself. Now come on, let's go to bed."

"No, Nona, I've got to speak to him. I . . . I've got to call him and if you won't do it, why, then I'll do it myself." She pushed me aside and started to get up, holding on to the pulley lamp for support. But the pulley lamp gave way and Evelyn fell at my feet, holding on to my knees for support, and then my knees gave way and we were on the floor together entwined with one another and the hot lamp was on top of us. The lamp was damn hot, so I yanked out the plug. It was dark, and Evelyn, after a silent pause, realized that she had fallen on her face on the floor.

"Uh, Nona, maybe you *had* better call. I'll wait here." But Steve insisted on speaking to her.

"Look, Steve, for Christ's sake, I've been up with her day and night now for a week and although *she* may be all drugged up, *I* need some sleep, so would you be so generous as to tell her that you love her so I can go to bed? . . . Look, Steve, I *know* you know your mother better than I do, and I know what you would have done in my place. She told me. But it just isn't in me to tie her to a chair and let her watch me pour all the liquor in the house down the sink and then not speak to her until she gets on the tablets. That's for *you* to do, Steve. I'm a woman and furthermore, she's not my mother. I've handled it the only way I could and if you have the gall to tell me that giving her affection—the one thing she wants and needs, the one thing that the great critic and teacher, Evelyn Gordon

McKenna, never gets—is the *worst* thing I can do for her then to hell with you. . . . Well, that's all I have to say, Steve, and I . . . I'm sorry that I had to get so angry, but I think you have one hell of a nerve telling me that everything I did was wrong and bad. Here's your mother; let's see what wonders you can do."

But the usual Steve-wonder was to hang up on her and leave the pieces for me to pick up, which I did. I picked them up, put them in the butterfly chair, and gave her so much attention that she forgot about the liquor.

That was the end of the liquor, I mean the absolute end. It was very hard for her, though; she trembled and shook and was awfully nervous, so I gave her an extra dose of Miltowns and she escaped to sleep, which was fine, for by morning she'd be able to take her first tablet and then she'd be back on her two fine firm feet again, and to hell with Steve and his forceful methods that never really had any effect other than a most immediate one.

And just before she went to bed she made some hot milk with nutmeg and cinnamon, and kissed me on my forehead with both her hands on my cheeks as she had never kissed me before. Not like that kiss at her elevator, the first time she had kissed me with a desperate fear, but now it was a kiss of thanks and love and strength. And I knew that she'd sleep that night and that if she did get up it would be for hot milk and nothing else.

"Good night, Evelyn," and it was also good night to a never-to-be-again night or nights or years of that sort of thing. Somehow I felt that I hadn't just helped her get off liquor for the ride to New York or for the week or month right now, but that that kiss was thanking me for some-

thing much more permanent than that. Maybe I was wrong, but I had faith.

I couldn't fall asleep. I was too torn between the happiness and excitement of having helped her so much and the terror and depression about this being the end and the possibility of losing her now altogether. But that problem was soon taken care of because the phone rang in the hall. I ran out to answer it, not that I expected a call at four in the morning but because I was sure it was an emergency for someone and since I was up and right there I flew out. And that's when I found out that my mother had told my father about my call.

"Hello, Nona, this is Dad. How are things in Middleton?"

What the hell was he calling me at four in the morning for, to ask how things were in Middleton. But I was scared, terribly scared, and I was exhausted, so I just said "Fine." Actually, things *were* fine. Evelyn was getting along beautifully and both apartments were packed up and plans were in sight for leaving on Monday for New York.

"Fine, Dad, what's the matter?" I hadn't wanted to say that but it just came out. What else can you say when your father calls at four in the morning with a saccharine voice that sounds like it's wavering on the edge of a volcano.

"I hear Mrs. McKenna isn't very well."

"She's just fine now, thank you, Dad."

"Uh, Nona, when did you say classes were over?"

"Last Friday, Dad, and if you remember you promised me that I could stay in Middleton until the lease ran out which is another two weeks but it looks as though I'll . . ."

"Goddamn it to hell! I'll give you twenty-four hours to

get into this house or else I'm coming up to get you. Did you hear me, Nona?"

I started crying so hard that I really couldn't answer, only enough to say, "Look, Dad, screaming at me like that only shows that you are not really calm enough to discuss this just now and I'm certainly not, so I'll call you about it in the morning." And I hung up before he could say anything.

I guess my crying was louder than I had imagined because Evelyn was waiting for me at the door to the living room.

"Was that your father?" she asked, knowing exactly who it had been and knowing exactly what had been said. My tears told her. She didn't need an I-said-then-he-said explanation. She knew. Without my saying anything to her, Evelyn was able to understand that half the responsibility rested on her shoulders, on her strength, and on her will power about the liquor. I could see that she understood this, if not too well.

"Look, Evelyn," I said after a minute, "look, just do your best. But if you can't, I mean I'll help you try in every way I can, but just don't feel pressured, just don't let him frighten you because there's nothing to be frightened of. I'm going to call him in the morning and ask him if we can't come down on Monday as we planned, and if he says no or if he says yes but you're just not well by Monday, then we'll just take your car so they can't trace the license and we'll take our stuff, and you have money, don't you?" and she nodded frantically, gripping my hand and listening hopefully, faithfully. "Well, then, I'll take you away in your car to a motel out of the state and we'll just stay there

until you are well and we won't go back to the city until you're well. All right, Evelyn?"

And instead of answering she pressed my head against her breasts, her small, hard little breasts which until now she had been so terribly modest about. It was as if now, with this agreement, this understanding and security, there wasn't anything that couldn't be shared between us, nothing that was to be kept secret. And we were so happy, so happy that we would be together and that we would get her well, that I was strong enough to call my father right back and strong enough to know how to handle him.

"When do you want me to come home?" I said as soon as he had said "Hello." He didn't say anything for a moment; I guess he didn't have anything to scream about.

"Well, uh, immediately."

"You know, it's the week end and the roads are terribly crowded. Would it be all right with you if we came down on Monday?"

"Well, yes, I think that would be satisfactory," he said, thinking that he had really made the decision to let us come and was just pompously assenting to what he had already planned would happen.

But even after the phone call, even after the agreement to come down on Monday we were still scared. We sat huddled together, my head in her lap, her hands on my head, just thinking, not talking but communicating, well, silently, beautifully. And after she went to bed, sometime in the early morning it must have been, the phone rang again . . . "Goddamn it, if you're not home Monday morning first thing no later than noontime, we're sending out the state police."

"Was that your father again?" Evelyn asked, seeing the tears flow and knowing, and feeling terribly insecure and guilty. The call had awakened her and she tried to go back to sleep but every time a tenant walked in the hall or a noise was heard from outside she'd jump out of bed and in that regal, feline stride would hurry over to me and say, "It's your father, I hear someone in the hall." And then a minute later she'd say, "Nona, he's here. Go with him and just leave me here . . . I'll be all right . . . just leave me here," and helplessly, hopelessly she'd sob and hug me and cling to me, trying to make me realize that she *had* to say that about my going and leaving her, but Jesus, how she didn't mean it, and how desperately she wanted me to know she didn't mean it without her having to say a thing.

And right before we were ready to turn the lights out and close the morning sun out so we could get a few hours of rest, the phone rang again. This time Evelyn, before I actually realized what was happening, ran out to the hall and was just about to pick up the receiver. God knows I neither wanted nor expected this to be my father again, and if it weren't I really wouldn't have minded her answering it but she was naked, except for her bra, and too fuzzy in the head to be aware that the phone was in the hall and that people went in and out at all hours. Not *really* fuzzy in the head, although she wasn't quite herself yet—I mean the alcohol was still there even though she hadn't taken any all day—but fuzzy with concern about this phone-calling business. She was so involved, so frightened, so terribly anxious that it couldn't have mattered less if the whole Masefield staff had walked by and seen her

standing at the wall phone reaching up, standing on her toes totally naked except for a sweaty, dirty bra that she had been wearing day and night because I had unwittingly packed up all her stuff and because it was too humid for it to have dried overnight if she had washed it—but anyway, she was too modest about that part of her to take it off long enough to wash it.

I couldn't understand that. I really couldn't. After all her sickness, and her being naked everywhere else, why was she so modest about the top? I mean, if it had been a padded one or something, then I might have understood, but it wasn't. It was a real, plain cotton bra but she'd never take it off.

Anyway, when I saw her run out into the hall like that I ran right after her and got out there just as she was about to say "Hello." She hadn't said it right off. First she had picked up the receiver, looking at it for a moment, sort of to see if she could tell who was in it. But she didn't seem to be able to do that so she had put it to her ear and waited a moment. Waited to compose herself and start acting. I mean she *was* weak, I knew that, but later she told me herself that she really *had* been acting, that she really wasn't as weak as she had made herself sound just then. I don't mean *just* then because *just* then I succeeded in grabbing the receiver from her before she had said anything. She was barely standing up. Not because she was drunk, because she really wasn't still what you'd call drunk if you had seen what she had been like before that, but just terribly weak and shaky and frightened, and just as I grabbed the receiver she wavered and fell onto me, so there I was leaning against the wall, with Evelyn leaning against me, and the phone somehow nearer

to my ears than to hers but the mouthpiece way up on the wall where I couldn't reach it because she was between me and it.

So somehow while the person on the other end kept saying "Hello . . . hello . . . hello," I got Evelyn supported in a way which enabled me then to say "Hello." "Okay, Dad, you've already said that. I got the point. We'll be home as soon as we can on Monday. . . . What do you mean that as-soon-as-we-can isn't good enough for you? Suppose it's pouring or something? Suppose something happens to the car? . . . But suppose I don't feel well? . . . Look, Dad, Jesus, don't say to hell with all those things; they're liable to happen. . . . Come on, Dad, I said I'll do my best. What's the matter with you? . . . What are you worrying about? . . . Well, it just so happens that Mrs. McKenna is fine. . . . Look, Dad, you know I was going to stay anyway, that Mrs. McKenna's being here has nothing to do with my staying here. . . . Oh, well, *that*—we'll have to discuss *that* some other time . . . no, I don't want to talk about it just now. . . . Look, Dad, I'm just fine and Mrs. McKenna is just fine and maybe I'll be able to take my exam if I come up to Middleton later in September. . . . I'm not sure, I said maybe. . . . God, look Dad, I simply don't *know*—now what's the use of aggravating yourself and me? Oh, God. . . ." And to fill in the time while I was weeping and couldn't speak, Evelyn took the phone and that's when she sounded a little weaker than she really was. That's when she used her wonderful acting ability, which was certainly getting some real exercise these past days.

"Mr. Greene, this is Evelyn McKenna. I'm much better now. I just want to tell you, Mr. Greene—I hope you can hear me, my voice must seem very distant but I've been

quite ill, you know—I just want to tell you, Mr. Greene, that you have a simply beautiful daughter. She's so fine and beautiful, and you know, Mr. Greene, she has really saved my life. If it weren't for Nona . . . well, here she is. . . ."

"Jesus, Dad, couldn't you have at least asked her how she felt? I don't care if you care or not, I mean of course I care, and you're just showing how crude you can be, and I don't care if she *can* hear me, but for God's sake, you're not even decent. . . . Look, Dad, I don't want to go on talking like this. I'll see you on Monday, as soon as we get there. . . . Oh, I just can't take it any more. . . . All *right*, we'll be there at lunchtime. . . . What? Well, I'm not going to leave her off in the middle of the street. . . . I'm not promising you any such ridiculous thing. Of *course* I'll go into her son's house for a cup of coffee if they ask me in. . . . He's a damn nice boy, Dad, and he has a very nice wife, they were just married, and look"—what the hell was I talking like that for? I thought—"I'll be home as soon as I get there and I will *not* promise you that I won't go into her son's apartment. . . . Oh, damn it. . . ."

XVI

"Nona, darling, come here, lean against me. Nona, you've been just a darling angel and I hate to see you so miserable. Don't worry about me. I'm pretty tough, you know. I'll be fine by Monday, and we'll get a very early start and we'll be home by lunchtime and then you can spend the day resting and getting ready to meet your father in the evening when he comes home. And, Nona, will you do something for me? When you see him, kiss him and tell him he was right and that he's wonderful, because don't forget, darling, you have to live with him. I won't be in New York but a few days but you have to live with him for much, much longer than that. Now come on, Nona, let's go inside and listen to some music and you'll make me some warm milk with nutmeg, all right? And we can just sit for a while until you feel calm enough to get some sleep. Come on now."

And for the first time Evelyn was the strong one. Not really. I mean she realized that this torture, this wretchedness and hysteria, was all really because of her, so she had to comfort me and had to sort of make suggestions about what we should do and predict what would happen and have me make silly promises about kissing my father. It all sort of made her feel motherly and protective and made her forget how unmotherly she had been, actually how

childish and dependent and mothered she had been for the past week. But while we were listening to Mozart and sipping milk, while we were together for one of the last times, I realized that she wasn't protective at all. I knew then that it was all just words, just a few words, because she was trembling and weak and nervous. She needed to drink and couldn't. So instead of drink she needed talking and affection and attention, and that motherly stuff on her part was just an act.

Within a couple of moments it was as if I were perfectly fine, all-knowing, all-protective all over again, and she started talking about Paul again, and Steve, and her husband, and about how she's really not an alcoholic, am-I-Nona? and about that guy in Middleton. And then it was morning. Of course it was morning. All those phone calls had been going on all night, so what else could it be but morning? And there was much that had to be done in a hurry. Returning some books to the library, going over to Evelyn's apartment and seeing that the movers took everything and that the super got a tip, and taking Evelyn over to Carla's so she could say good-by and go over some paper that she had promised to look at for Carla, and getting my apartment in order so that she could have meetings with her two assistants about her course grades, and . . . and with all that to do, how could we possibly imagine *having* to get out early on Monday? Supposing some of the things couldn't be done today, and tomorrow was Sunday, and that meant absolutely nothing, and then Monday. Well, hell, we couldn't be worried about that just now. "Live each day as it comes," Evelyn had said many times, so I began to do just that. Rather this time it was living each hour as it came, because days weren't very distinct any

more, especially with its being August and the sun being out so late, and Evelyn had a thing about clocks, especially while she was going through the torture of getting off the alcohol. In fact she had such a thing about clocks that I had to disconnect both of them, and it was just my luck that my watch wasn't working. So sometimes I couldn't have known whether it was dawn or dusk, and everything was just spinning. Evelyn seemed to be tired, seemed to want to sleep a lot towards the end because it was easier to sleep and not drink than to exist and not drink.

So while she slept, I ran over to see about the movers. I forgot the money. I mean I forgot to ask Evelyn for a check so I asked them to bill her, but they wanted cash and that just about did it. In fact, that did do it. After paying them I had exactly seventy-five cents left. I paid them and was left standing on the sidewalk watching the moving van pull away toward the warehouse, watching them take everything that belonged to Evelyn, watching them take the only things of her own away from her forever. Now she had nowhere, no key of her own to any door that opened to solitude and privacy and security. Now she had nothing, only that reluctant invitation from her son to spend the next few days with him until she sailed. But she'd always have my place. I mean wherever I lived, wherever I'd be, she'd know that that would be her home, too. But how could I really tell her that and mean it when I knew I'd be living at home and that my father already, even before meeting her, couldn't stand to hear her name mentioned.

But that didn't matter, my father's attitude. Not at all. For whatever the circumstances, I'd always manage to get her a place to stay where she'd be free of Steve's judg-

ments and my father's judgments and the criticism of all other such unfeeling people. But that wasn't of much concern just then. I watched the van move away all the security that she had ever known that past year but somehow, far off somewhere, I knew that if I ever had to I could offer her equivalent security and would, at any price.

Before I could go back to my place where she was probably still sleeping I had to run up to her old apartment and take one last look around. There were the walls that had enclosed her for the whole year, the toilet she had used, the sink, the tub in which her frail thin body had soaked, the icebox that kept the food that at one point in the summer I couldn't even imagine her having bought. But all was void, naked, empty. She wasn't there any more. I don't mean her body but all the things that were Evelyn McKenna, her spirit and soul and mind, all were gone, and all that was left of her was a garbage can with some trash piled in it.

For some unknown reason I found myself sitting cross-legged on the floor with the can in front of me, slowly picking out the items one by one. A piece of a photograph was on top so I put it aside, adding to it each time I came across another piece. Lots of mimeographed stuff that she must have passed out in classes . . . Oh, Jesus, a brand new box of Tampax. I remembered how I felt at her party, I don't remember which one, when I had been in the bathroom and decided to look through her medicine cabinet and came across that box of Tampax. I couldn't understand it. I mean I couldn't understand her keeping it in such an obvious place when she so often had students and friends over. And why always the same box unopened? So each

time I went up to her apartment I had run into the bathroom and checked to see if it had yet been opened because at that time I still wasn't very sure that she was human, that she functioned like every other woman; and to be *with* her when I knew that right at that moment she was going through some very human function which even I had experienced would have been like witnessing an equinox. . . . But now here it was, still unopened and in the can that she had filled up with the last pieces of trash that neither of us had had the strength to take out to the incinerator.

I started to think. . . . She had been so tense about going back to the city and seeing Steve that she had offered me those little whisky glasses, the plastic ones that come in a little leather case and fit into one another. She had offered them to me and then when I didn't want them she had thrown them away. Not that she wouldn't have enjoyed taking them to Europe—she undoubtedly would have—but just that she probably knew the inevitable if Steve were to come across them in her suitcase. So I guess this Tampax thing was the same problem. I guessed that keeping the Tampax in the bathroom where anyone who opened the cabinet for soap or a tissue or anything would find it was just a way she had of indirectly shouting in everyone's face, "I'm still a woman, a youthful, vital woman, and I'm young, young, young, do you hear, I'm young . . ." and I guess she knew that Steve didn't like that game. More than the business about her bra and more than her hating the word "alcoholic," Evelyn had a thing about her age. There was no doubt that she must be much older than she looked. After all, at the beginning I had taken her for a student. But how *much* older was the question. At first I had figured

that she must be thirty-five since she really looked thirty, but with all that talk about how no one, not even Steve, knew how old she was and how I would never know and how Paul never really knew and that the only person who knew was Maxwell, her very oldest and dearest friend, I really began to think that she just *must* be older than I thought and that's why she made such a to-do about who really couldn't know, but even though this was all so obvious I still couldn't believe that she was older than thirty-five. That is, until that last day in Middleton when I had to go over and drive her car to a lot where we had arranged to leave it until some friend in New York could take the train up and get it. Of course I couldn't resist looking at her license and when I saw . . . no . . . it couldn't be! Forty-two. Oh, God! Something's wrong! I mean all right, say maximum, for some unknown reason, she might be forty, but forty-two? Impossible! Anyway, the license said forty-two and then I understood why she had been so terribly secretive about her age. Not that forty-two is old—it's terribly young—it's just that she looked so extremely young that forty-two did become old for *her*.

So then I understood her modesty about her age but I still couldn't understand the Tampax business. If she were forty-two, then that was still too young not to need Tampax, and if that were the case, why hadn't the box been opened all summer? Oh, I just didn't know. And I really stopped thinking about it until that last day in New York, the morning of the day she sailed, when I was busy getting her stocked up on digestion pills, aspirin, and hundreds of drug store items. After several trips to the corner drug store and after she was quite sure she had remembered every-

thing that she had previously forgotten, I started saying, "Are you sure, Evelyn, that there's nothing you won't be needing? . . . Now you know there may not be a drug store on the ship and they may run out of stock and you never can tell what might happen on the ship and . . ." and just on and on, hinting like mad that I thought she'd better get some Tampax or something.

I could see that she kind of knew what I was saying but wasn't quite sure, and when she strongly assured me that she had everything I finally shut up. I mean maybe she had gone through the change of life very early and this reminding her of it was very painful. But it was after her ship had pulled out, after the distance between us was terribly real, terribly vast and frightening, after the ship was out somewhere in the Hudson and between us was only deep, mysterious, ominous water, it was then that her very oldest and dearest friend, Maxwell, whom I had heard about so much in Middleton—the man who had telephoned her faithfully and who had known her since she was a kid—told me how old she really was. And then I just couldn't believe it. He told me while I was driving and I had to pull over. And then I truly understood about the Tampax and about everything else . . . but there was so much that came before that, so very much.

XVII

I finished rummaging through the garbage, came out with a piece-by-piece photograph of her that was truly ghastly, but which I was sure would be invaluable to me during the winter, and part of a letter she had written to my father while she was drunk about how wonderful and beautiful and poetic I was, all the things that she could never say to *me*. That letter to my father was really all the love she had ever shown me. Somehow all her gestures of affection had never really meant anything to me; I may have felt elated for a few minutes but I knew the affection wasn't genuine. She was so possessive that it was as though her affection were assurance to herself that someone was there and that perhaps if she said "I love you" enough she'd make herself believe that maybe for once in her life she really did love someone, really, and that for once she wasn't just using them, hypnotizing them into a humble, servile obedience, charming them with her helplessness. But I don't think she *could* make herself believe that. And as for me, at that time I wouldn't have wanted to believe it.

So I gathered from the garbage all I could, all that I wanted, and went back to the apartment.

It was very late, and by the time we came back from having had dinner out we were both terribly exhausted. We

couldn't understand why we should suddenly feel so exhausted but then, slowly, we remembered. We remembered all the phone calls that were exhausting in that they came at all hours and kept us awake, but also in that they sapped us of all the emotional strength we had left . . . and the packing . . . and the sickness itself, her drinking, and what it had done to both of us, and now the anxiety of having to go back to the city, back to Steve, and back to my father.

So we knew why we were exhausted and why we wanted to go to bed so quickly. Being our very last night together, alone, I had wished that we could have been able to sit up together in the living room, she in the butterfly chair, I on the floor, the way we had done while she was sick. But we just had to get to bed. For some reason the temperature had dropped severely that day, and instead of the usual 90 or 100 it had dropped to 70, and now in the evening it was down to 50. The friends from whom I had been renting the apartment had left only one blanket, so without saying anything I went in and made Evelyn's bed, folding the blanket over double so she'd get sufficient warmth. And then she wanted to know what I would be using and didn't like it when I said I'd just throw my raincoat over myself, that I thought it would be enough. She didn't like it at all and suggested that we sleep together in her bed with the blanket . . . and then I was scared.

Often I had wondered if she had ever had any Lesbian tendencies. It certainly would not have surprised me at all. Not only because she was so lonely and weak and emotional, but also because of all the terribly neurotic people that she seemed to be so deeply involved with. That Maxwell, for instance, was homosexual; she had told me as though it were

quite unimportant. All right, I didn't mind that. After all, I didn't even know him, but I did wonder how she could have so many *dear* friends who were perverted. George, another friend of hers whose life story I had also heard in Middleton, was a homosexual, too. . . . "But, Nona, he's a marvelous artist," which in her mind excused it, just as Maxwell's being a poet excused him. And then I remembered her lectures and all the things Ellen had said and I wondered about her. But there had been such a purity about our affection, such an honest, forthright exchange of feelings and fears and thoughts, that I was sure she wasn't and was disgusted with myself for even supposing that she might be.

The thing that really scared me was me. Maybe I was one. I don't mean maybe I was a Lesbian so that from now on I should expect myself to go out in the streets and try to pick up women, but I mean if I'd have to sleep right next to her maybe I'd do something all of a sudden, without even thinking, and ruin the whole beautiful thing. It wasn't that I was thinking about anything at all sexual. I knew I wasn't. It was just that I always loved to be hugged and hugged. When my mother used to come in to kiss me good night and tell me a bedtime story, before she'd leave she'd sit on the edge of the bed, bend over and kiss me. I'd put my arms around her and hug her and hug her until she suffered physical pain and until she'd beg, "Nona, let me go, my back is breaking," and even if she had been hugging me for half an hour, which was usual, I'd cry when she left. I'd cry because I hadn't had enough. And that's the way it was with Evelyn. I knew it wasn't sexual. I knew I didn't want to change anything of the purity and beauty our love had known; I just wanted to be hugged and kissed and to hug and kiss and I

was just afraid that I might quite unconsciously in my sleep do something that would frighten her, and it would all be over. So finally, after she made me promise to sleep in her bed, I stretched myself across the foot of the bed, below the place where her feet would reach, and covered myself with the bottom of the blanket. "No, no, no, you must get *in* the bed, Nona, come on now, don't be so silly." So I got in the bed and pushed myself so far over to the wall that I was really half in the crack between the wall and the bed, and then I noticed something strange. For the first time in all the nights she had stayed with me she wore my silk nightgown and combed her hair and put on some perfume. Jesus, what did all this mean? Usually she'd get into bed either with nothing on at all except the bra or with that beaten-up old Japanese kimono, and now all of a sudden she was making an effort, putting on her love clothes . . . and for what?

"Well," she said, taking off her slippers and pulling down the covers, "this is a new experience. I've never slept with a *woman* before," and laughing, she got into bed, sipping some hot milk she'd made for herself and finally, turning off the light, said, "Are you comfortable? . . . that's good. Good night . . . good night, dear."

There was almost nothing said except an occasional "Oh, I'm sorry," in case we touched each other. And when I could see that she wasn't going to talk and that she wasn't going to sleep either, I stopped trying to keep myself awake, stopped trying to hold my eyes open with my fingers, and let them close, although I would start every time I felt as though I was almost asleep. I'd start, jump a little, and check to see that I was staying in my narrow corner and then, when I

finally decided to let myself fall asleep, I clasped my hands together and put them under me, put them under me and under the sash on my gown and then, then I felt safe and then I could sleep.

It must have been just a few minutes later . . . she was still awake and still sort of half sitting up against her pillow and saying, "What's the matter, darling, did you have a bad dream?" because I was saying how sorry I was for having waked myself up by talking in my sleep and for having stretched out so I touched her. I mean I only touched her arm but it was enough to frighten me out of sleep for hours. And then I started wondering . . . she must be thinking of the time she's wasting in bed with me, not doing anything, when she could be in bed with Sam doing lots of things, and then I tried to think about the lots of things she'd be doing just then and somehow I couldn't. Somehow, although she was notorious all over campuses for doing just what I couldn't think of her doing just then, somehow I couldn't imagine her in bed in any position other than the very graceful, regal one she was in just now, and certainly not in any unearthly, awkward pose with Sam, which was all I could picture when I succeeded in picturing anything so, as I said, I couldn't really picture her in bed with Sam at all. But then again, if I thought about it hard enough, of course I could, for she had been pretty obscene at times, and if you could forget that regal, feline dignity that she impressed you with and remember all those obscene tirades, then it wasn't very hard to picture her doing just about anything.

"Watch out for those intellectual men, Nona," she had said one evening at dinner, after the waitress had served her seven Bacardis and was on her way over with the eighth.

"Beware, Nona, because they've got a lot in their brains, everything in their brains and nothing, nothing at all in their balls," and that's when the waitress dropped the eighth Bacardi. But she went back and got a fresh one, so Evelyn got her eighth Bacardi, and also got an invitation from one of the men at the next table, a poetic-looking fellow, to let him show her how wrong she was. That taught her to lower her voice. Anyway, she *could* be awfully earthy and obscene, so I guess she could assume just about any pose in bed with Sam, good old Sam who, I found out that night, was a ditch digger. "It's not important to marry an intellectual, Nona. just marry a man of achievement, a physical type, a *man*—a man with something in his legs and feet and back and balls. A man!" So I guess Sam was a man, and since he probably didn't have very much in his head I guess he made up for it in all those other places she felt were so important. So I fell asleep picturing Evelyn being overcome with the brawn and fat of Sam, being crushed and used and just yielding helplessly, as always.

XVIII

It was wonderful to sleep. I mean of course I didn't know how wonderful it was until I wasn't sleeping any more. That's how everything is, though. We really can't tell how wonderful something is until we don't have it any more. Oh, I know there are things and people and times that we do treasure and know and value at the moment, but mostly it's later that people realize and show their realization. I mean take Evelyn's funeral, whenever it would be. There would be critics and scholars from all over the world and Steve would be clumping around the parlor sort of as if to say, "I'm her son and now that she's dead all the brilliance is mine, so don't act so wonderful because you knew her. She was *my* mother and if anyone's going to enjoy her reputation now, it's going to be *me*," and then he'd start saying to all the Princeton men and the Masefield ones, especially the Masefield ones, "Oh, she was such a wonderful mother—devoted, loving, attentive. . . ." And there would be Evelyn in the coffin deaf to the truth, not deaf because she was dead, because this kind of deafness is different, this kind of deafness she would have had even when she lived . . . deaf because he had never said one of those things to her when she lived. All she had heard from him then was how drunk she was and how dissipated and immoral, and immoral and dis-

sipated and . . . so she wouldn't *ever* have been able to hear this kind of praise. Coming from him, it would have been too absurd for her fine, reasonable mind. But she wasn't dead and I wasn't asleep. I mean she had just shaken me and called "Nona!" so I had awakened quickly, jumped, and that's when I realized how beautiful it is to sleep, and then I thought the reason she had called me was that she was dying, so that's when I thought of her funeral. But she was right there next to me, and very much alive. I guess judging from her freshness that she really hadn't been to sleep at all yet. "Nona . . . Nona . . . I can't seem to fall asleep, dear. Won't you just talk to me for a while, just until I feel tired?"

That's what would always happen and that's what had been happening all the last week. You're only good and fine and beautiful and all those things I told your father you were when you are of some use to me, but other than that . . . that's how I knew she felt. Sometimes, quite naturally at times, I felt that this was just simply how she expected people to be. People were sort of actors in a play. I mean, they were supposed to act in a certain prescribed way, and they were expected to know their courses of action, to know their parts. "Oh, I'll pay for the dinner tonight" was her line and then the other actor was supposed to know that his line was "Oh, Evelyn, of course not . . . here, let me take the bill, and here, here's an extra five for you to just carry around with you. Here, just put it in your wallet." And then, because she was so happy that the other person knew his role so well, she'd become docile, helpless, all-accepting . . . all-accepting because she was satisfied and because she knew that it was a great honor for the other person to be *able* to help Evelyn

Gordon McKenna. I mean, she'd never acknowledge feeling that way, but deep inside her she knew that most of the younger, more impressionable members of her various coteries could easily be made to feel, with little effort on her part, that this was really a great privilege for them. She made that clear to me during the period when my father was calling all the time, by telling me about Pasha . . .

Pasha had been one of her Milton students at Trinity and when Evelyn had felt one of these spells coming upon her she had called Pasha's father, another English professor, and had asked him if he'd let Pasha come and live with her for a week or so and help her get back on the tablets, and Pasha's father had said, "Why, of course, Evelyn, I think it would be a wonderful experience for her." So Pasha had come and her father had thought it would actually be a good experience. She kept telling me about Pasha so as to make me very conscious that I should really be treasuring this experience and that I should really feel fortunate that she had chosen me to be the one. Just think, she might have chosen any of hundreds of other students, but she hadn't. It was *me*. And I guessed she hoped it would make me realize how thoroughly stupid my father was, and that here was an intelligent father, a professor, who had actually seen it as a learning experience. I mean I didn't actually realize it at the time but I was beginning to dislike Evelyn for that, for making me hate my father so much. I couldn't even see that maybe he loved me and was frightened and wanted me to be safe and happy, and she didn't help me to see it, either. She only helped me see how obtuse he was, and that's all that I saw, too. Just his outrageous pomposity and self-righteousness.

So it was a privilege to be awakened to talk to Evelyn so that Evelyn would grow tired and could finally sleep, because Evelyn had a long trip to New York the next day and Evelyn was anxious about going to Steve's and about the possibility of having to meet Mr. Greene, so Evelyn needed comforting and attention. My, what a privilege!

"Nona, do you know the lines of Campion's, 'Rose-cheeked Laura, Come' . . . mmm? . . . They are lovely things to memorize. . . . They seem so simple and yet . . . yet they are so exquisitely meaningful. You know that Campion, like Spenser and others, was experimenting with syllabic verse, and that's why the lines are so hauntingly musical . . . while the substance of the meaning is, of course, Platonic . . . equating the image of the lady, as in Dante's *Vita Nuova*, you know, Nona . . . equating the image of the lady with ideal beauty . . . and using the contemporary vocabulary of music to define it sensually and structurally. . . . It's most complex, really. . . . You know, Nona, the lines have been running through my mind many times these past few days . . . they give me something to grasp . . . they heal and soothe . . . they give light . . . and they cast a spell . . . a benign spell . . . a benight sp . . . 'night . . . 'night, dear . . ."

XIX

The next morning there was a rainstorm, a hailstorm with big, round ice balls that hit you in the forehead and stung and bit and burned. That hit you in the ear and deafened you to reality, enclosing you in a strange, unreal world. Masefield . . . and my last look at it was just as fantastically unreal as the whole last ten days had been. In the middle of summer there was Masefield covered with hail balls . . . all over the campus, hail balls. And then the very last time I walked on the campus . . . Evelyn had me drive by to pick up her check and the officer wouldn't let us drive in so we parked on the avenue and trudged across the campus, huddling together for warmth and shelter and for assurance of reality, assurance that we really were in Masefield, in Middleton, not in a heaven or hell that was just made to look like Masefield. Evelyn got her check and the hail balls were hitting even harder when we got back to the car. They were piled up against the windshield now so we couldn't see and their weight prevented the windshield wipers from running, so I got out and cleared them and Evelyn sat in the front seat drying her toes with my sweater. Then I ran out to get her cigarettes so she could sit in the car all day and smoke, and then I ran out again to get her some Lifesavers so she could suck them all afternoon.

The hail balls kept falling and hitting and cutting, and the sky was dark and wretched when finally we left and finally got onto the cold, wet, slippery, lonely turnpike.

It was almost evening anyway, and the road was dark. There were very few cars, but when one did pass it was as if ten had come. The wet highway reflected the lights, making them not only more glaring, but longer and brighter. It was terribly silent except for the swishing of the tires and the splashing of an occasional puddle and the zoom of a passing car.

Evelyn sat all the way over, leaning against the door and smoking. She smoked like a fiend. Even though it was very hot, she had shut her window, partly because of the rain and partly because of the wind generated by our speed. The clicking of the windshield wipers was getting on my nerves and distracting my eyes, and the rain was blowing in violently now, so I had to shut my window, too. The car filled with smoke and we got dizzy and sick, but somehow it didn't seem to matter. Somehow this was the first trip in which carsickness just didn't seem to bother me. Evelyn was next to me, slowly, ever so slowly coming out of the world she had been living in all week and entering the social, public world once more, and I was far more concerned with the fear of whether or not there would be room for me in that new world ahead than I could ever have been about getting sick from the smoke in the car.

And then something in the rear-view mirror caught my attention. It was terribly annoying, for I kept looking back at the mirror, my eyes darting from the road to the mirror, back to the road and then always back to the mirror, because I couldn't imagine what that thing was. The car was so dark,

and the wetness outside made everything so absolutely black that whatever it was in the rear-view mirror stood out. It was a circular form of light, moving, wavering, and rotating. And then I realized what it was. Evelyn was sitting with her cigarette in her hand and sort of swinging her wrist around and around in a circular motion. She had always done that. All the many days and nights in Middleton. But now, because it was dark, the act seemed to haunt me. The light looked like a pinwheel, a pinwheel-firecracker, a hellish, spitfire design. I was damn annoyed. It was distracting as all hell, and driving was difficult enough with the slippery pavements and the glaring lights and the windshield wipers. I wished she'd stop it.

The car was just thick with smoke, and full of the rainy blackness of the outside. Maybe we'll have an accident. Maybe we'll skid or another car won't be able to stop and will skid into us. But maybe it won't be so accidental. Supposing Evelyn isn't planning to make room for me in that public and social world we're driving towards. Then why should I bother driving so carefully? But why should *I* die? Maybe I should just have her die. I'd forget her after a while. Maybe she's going to desert me anyway, so I shouldn't worry about these damn wet roads.

What's the matter with me! I *do* love you, Evelyn, despite my thoughts, which perhaps you know. I do love you and I didn't mean to think them. I didn't, really. It was just that it's so dark, and there's so much smoke, and the roads are so dangerous, and I'm so afraid you'll desert me. I just couldn't help my thoughts.

At that minute her voice interrupted the darkness and cut through all the smoke and my thoughts. It was as if she

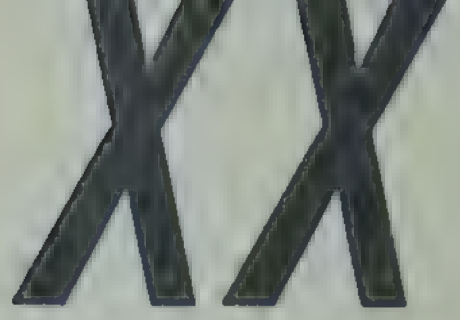
understood the mental anguish I was going through, as if she knew completely what the dark and the silence and the twirling cigarette were all together doing to me. And she started speaking as she had not spoken in all the time we were living together . . . she began to speak softly, compassionately and, most important, sanely. It was almost like being back in my front row seat in the museum listening to her lecture, only I didn't have a tape recorder now and anyway, things could never be as they were then, before all this. Besides, the lectures may have been wonderful but they were never as wonderful as this one because this one was mine, dedicated to, directed to, and involving *me*, and almost as important, they were *Evelyn*, not Dante or Byron but Evelyn. . . .

"Have you ever read St. John, Nona? Hmmm? . . . Well, you should, dear, go back and reread St. John when you get settled in New York. Ah, his statement of the essence of tragedy . . . I'm thinking of making it the epigraph to my novel—the only thing is that it's the epigraph to *The Brothers* . . . let's see if I can remember it now . . . 'Verily, verily I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.' There, I remembered it. See, if you stick something in the dark ground after a few weeks it produces, it grows. And as man becomes more and more civilized, it's a very natural analogy to human hopes themselves, do you see that? The metaphor of planting a seed in the ground is parallel to human sufferings. You go through suffering of a great order and it's like a well of darkness but there has always been, Nona, in the literature of man a certain pattern in which we see the dark night of the soul as possibly leading to a better

form of being in the end. So what St. John is really saying is that unless something is buried it will not bring forth. That something can be so many things, Nona. That's what makes these parables so great, their deep ambiguity. The something can stand for the hope of immortality, or it can apply to the experience of suffering, and then the whole question arises, *can man be reborn through suffering?* Well, what do you think? Do you want to know what I think? All right. Well, darling, as you study further you'll find that in the great works of tragic literature, the greatest expressive form of man's destiny, we have represented exiles, killings off, and so forth on and on, but if tragedy is to perform its cathartic function there is some evidence that the exile or the killing off or whatever results in a better form of being. Remember Magwitch, Nona, wonderful old Magwitch in *Great Expectations?* In him we see deeply sustained human suffering. He wasn't bright, he wasn't educated. He just quite simply had to exist. But after, we feel that strong sense of a figurative representation of human suffering. At the end he is a far nobler person, there is far more realization in him, then, of the nature of things. And remember that when Pip goes to London and gets fine clothes and a library and ruby rings and a personal valet who nearly drives him mad, he becomes completely ashamed of Joe. He completely denies him. He won't even see him. But then, oh, how brilliant Dickens is here, with the coming of Magwitch, Pip can't bear it, remember, dear? He can't bear it and sees into the illusion and it's a period of heavy suffering for Pip, a period of both repugnance as well as distress. He can't bear Magwitch, but if he doesn't watch him he'd be caught by the law, and yet he suffers, and his suffering is combined with hatred and repul-

sion. Then slowly a change occurs in Pip, just as it does with Magwitch, and Pip becomes a better person and eventually can go back to Joe. Well, what I'm trying to say, dear, is this business about the night journey, the journey through suffering, the journey that always eventually yields better wisdom. Now I'll tell you something in German. Do you understand German, Nona? Well, then I'll translate it for you, but first I'll say it in German because it's so beautiful. You know, you should learn German some day, too . . .'*Schuldig müssen wir werden, wenn wir wachsen wollen.*' That is, if we desire to grow we have to become guilty. Suppose you never became guilty or knew that you were guilty. Then you'd never change, like Becky Sharp, eh? No, Nona, we cannot remain innocent if we are to grow. . . . If we had stayed in the Garden of Eden we wouldn't be worth much. . . ."

What was she saying? Why Pip? Why Magwitch? Why, all of a sudden, was she talking so about suffering and guilt? She didn't say. She didn't say anything else, hardly, all the way home, so I was left again to think, to drive, to look ahead down the dark, glistening road and watch the fiery circles twirling around and around, and to wonder what the guilt was—for she had just said that, that we have to become guilty, and then we know we are guilty—but really, honestly, I didn't know that I was, not just now, at least not yet.



Traffic had been pretty heavy entering New York, so even though we had left Middleton in the afternoon we didn't get to Steve's house until eleven.

The street Evelyn directed me to was very narrow and terribly dark, and lined with warehouses and dirty tenements. People were crowded on the stoops laughing and chattering and fanning themselves in the heavy throbbing heat. Evelyn told me to pull up in front of the next warehouse; Steve lived there over a stable. When we got out we could smell the horses and hear them clattering around inside. There was straw and garbage all over the sidewalk.

Upstairs Steve opened the door and gave Evelyn his cheek to kiss. Ah, Steven, do you think you can spare that much affection for your mother? Don't strain yourself. I mean don't hurt your back bending over so that *she* can kiss you, can kiss your smelly, rotten, pimply face. And then he said "Hello" to me. I didn't expect a reward or anything for what I had done, I really didn't, but somehow I thought it would have been nice if Steve had taken me aside and said, "Thank you for all you've done for my mother." So I waited, expecting it to happen any minute.

Evelyn was exhausted; after all, she had had a long trip so "Nona, dear, would you please unload the car—Steve will

help you." So Steve and I started unloading the car. It was terribly hard work, not only because there were loads of things—suitcases and books—but because in order to get them into Steve's apartment we had to walk up four wobbly flights of stairs that smelled of horses, with bug-infested garbage cans on every landing, and we had to keep stepping over the derelicts who were sleeping seemingly one beside each can.

Every time I found myself out on that lousy Village street —with derelicts staggering from curb to building to curb, and all that garbage and the heat—I kept expecting Steve to say something about Evelyn and me. But he maintained a stony silence. Then, after we had gotten the things all into the house, his wife, Marge, made some coffee and we sat around looking at each other with prying glances, and then I realized that I couldn't really remember ever having been more miserable. Marge was looking across the table at Steve with a strained expression of boredom unsuccessfully hidden by a sheer and transparent covering of smiles. But under it all it was plain that all she wanted was for me to leave, for Evelyn never to have come, and for Steve to get undressed and go to bed with her. That's all her face expressed, just one big desire to sleep with Steve. All the rest of it, this coffee and the talk, and Evelyn and me, we were all just hindrances to this great desire. I felt so completely an outsider. Steve had Marge, and Marge had Steve, and Evelyn had Steve in a sense, but more than that, Evelyn didn't have to have anyone. That was it. She had managed to live that long tragic life without having anyone, so it really was as if she did have someone, her loneliness, with which I always felt in competition. I mean so often, sitting with her in Middleton, trying

to reach out to her and finding only a silence, a far, lost look, or else finding a verbal explosion all directed to the past, to the lonely past, I felt that she was much happier pulling herself into herself and being with her loneliness than she was having to pull herself out of herself and be with me. So now she was with herself, something I could never be, and the newlyweds had each other, and I had nothing. And then it hit me. This was absolutely without a doubt the last time I'd ever see Evelyn. She'd be terribly busy now seeing old friends like Maxwell, dear Maxwell, and getting passage and packing. And now that she was better . . . oh, damn it, I just *knew* that I'd never see her again and anyway, I was very lonely, so I started crying right there at the table. "Oh, poor Nona, look, she's so terribly tired. . . . Nona, why don't you call your father and spend the night here. . . . Nona, would you like a Miltown, dear, before you drive home?"

Steve, who was beginning to feel uncomfortable because I was getting all the attention, suddenly and abruptly changed the subject so that everyone would turn toward him.

"Mother, I've just finished reading *Remembrance of Things Past.*"

"Oh, really, dear? What did you think?"

"Not much. I just think Proust was looking at things under a microscope and got so lost in all the little trees of his own personal life that he lost sight of the forest. I can't understand why a man with talent like that, and he does have talent—even though underneath it he's got neurasthenia—doesn't come to grips with metaphysical problems instead of getting all caught up in the events of his own, unimportant life." Steve was leaning back in his chair, balancing on its two back legs; his hands were in their pockets and his

library of Plato and Aristotle and Kant was framing him from the back and he was the great all-knowing master, the philosophy student who couldn't see any reason for fiction, seeing it as no use at all and telling his mother, his brilliant, dependent mother, that *he*, Steven Joseph McKenna, had come to the monumental decision that Proust was no good because he drew on his own experience for his novels. And Evelyn looked at him lovingly, almost sympathetically. . . .

"But, dear, it's a most natural tendency for the poet to become the hero of his poem . . . the novelist to become the hero of his novel. And Steve, it is wrong to say that the hero *is* Marcel Proust, though the identification is very close. Steve, dear, don't you see? When society has failed to be a conveyor of traditional values for life in the next generation, where is the author going to turn to find livable values, values to live by? He *must* give up what society gives him."

Steve pouted.

I was lonely. And it was time the attention got back to me, so I got up and said I had to leave. I wanted Evelyn to come out to the car with me and kiss me good-by, thanking me beautifully for everything. I don't mean a thank-you-for-everything kind of thank you, but I wanted her to sort of go through an inventory of every gesture, every event, every beautiful moment we had shared. But she didn't. She just said good-by, only good-by, and somehow I couldn't believe that I would never see her again. I couldn't believe that just because she was back in a social situation again she wouldn't have the humanity to say something, anything, maybe not an inventory, maybe only a thank you, before leaving for Europe for possibly *years*. But she didn't say anything—only good-by—so I refused to believe that I wouldn't see her again.

XXI

Going home then was worse than it had been going home on the subway after the night with Miguel or returning to Middleton from Herb's and having to face studying Italian. It was just about the worst, most anxious trip I'd ever had. I drove slowly, purposely making every red light, purposely taking the long way, prolonging every minute, stretching them out for as long as I could, but for some reason I got home in less time than I had ever taken when I'd tried to race.

There I was, there was my home. My parents' light was still on. But if I went directly to my room and closed the door immediately and didn't get up in the morning until my father had left, then maybe I wouldn't have to look into his eyes, and if I kept it up I might succeed in avoiding him until Evelyn left for Europe, whenever that would be. I just couldn't bear to mix him up in the same events with Evelyn. So I thought that if I just didn't have to see him until the immediate intensity of Evelyn's being in the city was relieved by her departure, then maybe we wouldn't even have to fight, and maybe I would be calm and uninvolved enough to see his side and understand. If only I didn't have to see his face *now*.

I hadn't wanted to see his face then, either, back then, that summer when I was eleven or so and we had gone fishing together out on the island. We had rented a rowboat and had started at about six in the morning. We had just sat, smiling and laughing together, pulling up one fish after the other, not feeling we had to say anything, just enjoying each other, as it was only possible to do when I was that young. And then in the evening, about five, we'd decided we had better get back. The wind was blowing up and the whitecaps were high and strong. He started rowing. We didn't move. He rowed and rowed, assuring me that everything was all right, that it was just the strong wind, and then I saw that he was red in the face and looking tired, so I thought I'd try, and while I was sitting in the rower's seat I saw that the anchor hadn't been pulled up. So he was abashed. And then the silence wasn't so beautiful any more, and I was a little afraid to look at him then because I knew he was embarrassed. And while we were rowing I was pretty hungry and he told me that we'd have to wait until we got to land, perhaps an hour or so. And then I shrieked with happiness. In the water there was a long, white plastic balloon-looking object . . . "Dad, look, there must be a food stand close by, there's a frankfurter bag. . . ." And I was picturing a lighthouse with a big sign, REFRESHMENTS, and I looked at him, so terribly anxious for him to say "Yes, you're right, I see it, there must be a stand close by, come, we'll get some food." But he didn't. He put his bottom lip under his front teeth in that expression of pain and said no, that it wasn't a frankfurter wrapper, and he tried to tell me what it was, and he used that word that I had run into all that trouble about with Helen the night she tried to tell me about the birds and the

bees and the flowers, and I knew that my father was fooling. He was always fooling. Everything was always a joke, and I couldn't believe that for once he was serious. And then he said how a lot of that stuff takes place on these yachts during the night, and that's why they're always floating in the water . . . and then I just *couldn't* look at his face, not for weeks. Nor could I ever go fishing with him again. . . .

I went into the house and shut the front door as quietly as I could, but Mother was still up and heard anyway. She rushed downstairs and put her arms around me. She didn't pry, she didn't question or demand. She just loved and comforted and abided.

Evelyn called the next day. If it hadn't been for the accent I would never have recognized the voice. It seemed so out of context, with me sitting in my room hearing it. She had gotten passage, was leaving the next day, and Maxwell was giving a party that night, a farewell party for her with all the Village intelligentsia, whatever that meant. Anyway, I was invited . . . it was my big chance to meet Maxwell, a great and wonderful artist and poet, and all the others who were at Columbia, or were published or, as it was with the artists, "hung" in so-and-so's collection or gallery. So Evelyn asked me to shop with her all day, getting things for the trip and helping her. I was to bring my outfit for the party because we were going straight from Steve's house. That meant another session with Steve and Marge, but it also meant a whole uninterrupted day in New York with Evelyn. Evelyn and I in *my* city, in and around places that were familiar and dear to me. I mean, now I'd *know* it wasn't a dream. It was one thing to be in Middleton and have it all happen there

where I had never been before and where I might never go again—a place that might always remain for me almost a myth—but New York was a real place, and now I knew that I was real again and *now*, if she were with me, I'd know, I'd really know that everything had happened and was still happening; but by this time tomorrow it would all be ended.

The day sped by with barely time for me to stop and realize with whom I was or why or where. Not even time to stop and treasure a moment. Running from store to store, from department to department, carrying piles of clothes to her in the dressing rooms while she just sat and waited for me, and then tried them on and then shook her head and then asked me to bring in more. And finally, when she had exhausted the stock, and herself, and me, we went home with what we had and spent the afternoon, almost in silence, putting up hems and taking in seams. *We* . . . she sitting and meditating in that being-in-herself mood, and I nervously sewing, on the verge of tears every moment, wondering with whom she'd be when she would be wearing whatever it was that I was sewing just then. And sometimes she'd run her fingers through my bangs and pat my head, usually just before tossing a new pile of skirts on my lap, and sometimes she'd even speak. But something was going on inside Evelyn. She looked frightened. I guessed it had something to do with Maxwell's party, something to do with the evening ahead. . . .

XXII

The four of us, Steve, Marge, Evelyn, and I, got there pretty early. Maxwell was still getting dressed and his wife, Sarah, was naked because she was still making the dress that she was going to wear. The guests were all patting her on her naked back and telling her not to hurry about getting the dress finished.

I couldn't understand the marriage; Evelyn had told me it was purely a cerebral thing. But how? How could the woman stand to live with a homosexual? But they called each other "darling," and then I was able to accept that cerebral business more easily. And she had her own life, her art and painting, and he had his life, his poetry and films and . . . and I guess his friends. All the friends that were there. They seemed to adore him.

The guests started arriving. "Nona," in muted whispers, "that's the critic Emily Grant and the woman with her is Jeanne Farrar, the poet . . . they're Lesbians." I couldn't believe it. I thought they had to be very queer-looking . . . short hair, masculine gestures, deep-voiced, or else long hair, dirty hands . . . but these two women were perfectly presentable; in fact Jeanne Farrar was simply lovely. She looked sad, but nothing more than that. Actually she looked a little like Evelyn.

So then I started looking around at all the other perfectly presentable, feminine-looking women, and wondering. It was like a masquerade party.

Maxwell's punch started flowing and everyone offered Evelyn a glass and I rushed to get her a glass of quinine water so she wouldn't have to launch into an explanation of being on the wagon again, and it seemed almost like five minutes later that everyone started coming over to Evelyn and wishing her a good trip and good luck with her writing. She thought I should stand next to her and thereby meet all these "very important people" as they left, but when I heard the first good-by, I had to run out to the terrace where no one could see me cry. I cried as I had cried when I was six years old, sobbing with my whole body until it really hurt.

It must have been about an hour later when Maxwell came out looking for me, trailing behind him several young, delicately beautiful boys, each pushing the others aside so that he could be the one nearest Maxwell. They were watching me with curious eyes.

"Ah, Nona, come here, *darling*." And his strong arms tightly around me started molding the shape of my back, going down, and down. . . . "Look, Nona, look at these stupid friends of mine," he said, pointing to the three boys whose eyes were wide now with jealousy. "They think I'm sexing you," and with an enormous wheezy laugh he pushed his body very strongly against mine. I knew that Maxwell didn't, *couldn't*, feel any attraction to me, but it seemed as though he desperately wanted the boys to think he did, so he kept whispering inaudible things into my ears and making everything look very authentic, and then I knew that I was on the road to something because I felt too weak to resist him. Not that

he was doing anything very wrong to me just then, but just that I realized that I was so depressed, so hysterical and lonely and miserable that I would let any man—even if he weren't a *real* man—stand there and make an exhibition of me to his friends, and I didn't know *what* could make any difference to me, or what I could let happen.

"I understand you, Nona, and I love you because you can love as I can. There aren't many people in the world who can really love, you know that," he said, gently tracing a finger around my still-wet face. "And we, we who can really love in the purest and most beautiful way, we are the greatest lovers of all. Was this your first Lesbian affair? . . ."

"Jesus Christ, Maxwell, what the hell are you talking about? What the hell are you saying? Oh, God, how can you think of that? I'm not a Lesbian. I'm not."

"Oh, come on, Nona, we're all queers here, aren't we, Joe? You don't have to hide a thing. . . . What's there to be ashamed of? . . ."

"Maxwell, get away from me. I wish I had never come here. To hell with you and all the people here . . . let me go . . . where's Evelyn? . . . Evelyn! . . . Evelyn!"

I mean, being accused of being a Lesbian by *anyone* would have been one of the most terrible things I had ever been through, but being told by such a pervert who probably *knew* Lesbians was worse, because supposedly he was a professional at spotting them. But I knew the truth myself so I really didn't care . . . and I needed Maxwell so badly then, because he knew Evelyn, and understood her in his own crazy way better than anyone else could, that when he invited me to come over during the winter, and kissed me, and assured me that he liked me and wanted to see me often,

I completely forgot the accusation and loved him, and clung to him, almost as though he were a part of Evelyn, a part of her that *would* be in New York all year, a part of her that wasn't going to leave me forever; for no one, no one in the world knew her better than Maxwell.

And after all the guests had left, mostly couples of men and couples of women, except, of course, for Marge and Steve and a few others, Evelyn and I got ready to leave too. Maxwell hugged us both, winking at me as if to say I won't act crazy with you any more, Nona. I guess you're not a Lesbian although then again, I don't know . . . I think you are. But anyway I understand you because even if you're not a Lesbian you're nuts, simply nuts to follow her around like this, catering to her, pouring her drinks, getting hysterical because she's leaving. You're nuts, and so am I, so I do like you and understand, and I'll be seeing lots of you after Evelyn leaves. We'll be seeing lots of each other.

While I was taking Evelyn back to Steve's she was frighteningly silent. I was waiting for her to speak, to say something tender, but the stony silence continued. A cold, somber silence against a hot summer night that was crying out for love, for tenderness, for honesty, and all we were offering it was a still reticence, a painful reserve.

"Evelyn, look, there are some things I want to tell you now because it's probably the last time I'll see you alone like this. First of all, I've gotten you a two-years' supply of the tablets; I got them from a doctor I know and it won't cost anything. . . ."

"Oh, darling, that's wonderfull"

"Oh, that's all right, Evelyn, but I just want you to know you've got them and that you'll have enough. The other

thing. . . . Now, Evelyn, don't say no before you let me finish. You know, I'd love to be going over with you, but I just can't. But I'll tell you what I've decided to do. As soon as you leave I'll somehow, I don't know how exactly, right now, but somehow I'll get the passage and my passport and if you should ever need me, ever even feel you just might need me, I want you to cable or call and I'll come right over. It can all be done within twelve hours. And, Evelyn, if by December you haven't called, I'll send it to you in the form of round trip passage home for Christmas. . . ."

"Nona, that's wonderful, dear . . . just wonderful. Oh, we're home. . . . Nona, I love you, darling, and thank you for everything. Good night, dear."

"Good night, Evelyn. And Evelyn, about Steve, maybe you'd better not tell him."

"All right then, dear, I won't. It will be our little secret. . . . 'Night."

The next morning, even though I tried, I wasn't able to avoid my father. "Nona, as soon as you get back from seeing the ship off today I want you to come right home and we're going to have a talk." Oh Jesus, a talk in that tone of voice meant certain disaster, so I quickly called Ellen who was at her country home in Rockport and asked if I could come up that afternoon and stay for a few days. She screamed into the phone and called to her mother in the next room that I was coming. I was going to get there in the early evening since the ship left at one. That meant I could get out of the talk, at least for a few days.

Driving into the city to pick up Evelyn seemed like such a final thing. It was as though I had had what I could expect of life and now, quite simply, I had to accept the beatings

and pushings that everyone else had been getting all the while I had been so happy having Evelyn. It was as though I were giving myself up to some kind of devil, for I felt so beaten and alone to think of saying good-by and so guilty for having had so much, that I didn't think I would be the least bit strong or capable of resisting or avoiding anything bad that might happen.

Steve and Marge were at their jobs and had planned to get to the ship just in time to wave. Evelyn was left alone at Steve's house with piles of clothes and books and papers. She was trembling and weepy when I got there, so I took over the packing and put everything into the car. It was almost as though the whole thing had been a film and were now being shot backwards. Now it was the part where Steve and I had unpacked the car and brought everything in, stepping over bodies, tripping over garbage, and where I had had a terrible fear that I'd never see her again. Now the film was clearer and sharper. I *knew* I wasn't going to see her again. I knew that there was no tomorrow during which I could stay home and wait for the phone to ring, no night in which I could lie awake and dream of what the next day would be like, what I would wear, where I would take her, what we'd discuss. But in one sense the picture wasn't clearer and sharper because it was all viewed through thick tears. I could feel my cheeks tense and my jaws shake beyond my control. I could feel a burning in my eyes and the sharp heat of the tears on my cheeks, but I couldn't relax or stop the tears or see very clearly.

It occurred to me that we could have left most of her things in my car to begin with, since I was driving her over

to the docks and we'd have to reload the car and then unload it all over again. But that would have been too easy, and besides, it would have given me peace of mind, because at least I would have been sure that I was going to see her that once, that one final time at the ship. And peace of mind just had no place at all in the complex syndrome of the relationship which had caused more tension and anxiety and tears than I had ever known before.

XXIII

"Oh, Maxwell, you made it. How terribly good of you to see me off. . . . Nona, dear, this is my publisher. . . . Ed, this is Nona. . . ."

"Oh, Nona, I've heard so terribly much about you . . . it's as though I already know you. . . ."

"Here, Evelyn, the porter just brought some flowers. . . ."

"My, this isn't a bad little stateroom at all . . . only thing is there's no window. . . ."

"Oh, Nona, the flowers are lovely, dear, just lovely. . . ."

"Well, Mother, Marge and I had better leave now. You know we're only on our lunch hour. Have a good time, Mother, and for God's sake don't drink. . . ."

"Good-by, darling, I love you, and Marge, take good care of my little grandchild. Oh, does everyone know? I'm going to be a grandmother in February. . . . Oh, Steve, darling, I can't go. . . ."

"Mother, stop acting absurd. Stop crying and entertain your guests. Now come on, Mother, snap out of it . . . you know you'll have a wonderful time. . . ."

"Good-by, darling, kiss me. . . ."

"Good-by, Mother. . . ."

"Well, Evelyn, if Steve's leaving I guess we'd better go too. . . ."

"No, Ed, stay awhile. . . . It's all happening so fast I don't want it to seem as if I'm going yet. Please stay. . . ."

"Oh, Evelyn, we love you and we'll be waiting for your first draft to reach us, but honestly, we've got to run now. You've still got Nona and Fairfax and Maxwell. Good-by, dear. . . ."

" 'By-by, Ed. . . . What's that bell, Nona? It sounds terrible. What is it?"

"*Guests are requested to leave the ship immediately.*"

"No, don't go yet. . . . That announcement means you can stay another ten minutes. . . ."

That's all that was left of it. Ten minutes. Ten minutes of waiting to say good-by, ten minutes of aching with tears and wanting to scream out. Ten minutes of wanting to be alone with her and having to listen to Maxwell and his boyfriend, Fairfax, making dirty jokes and predicting that she'd live with a hundred men and never be lonely, thinking it would make her happy to hear that and relieve her grief, but not knowing that they were torturing her by speaking about things that she really didn't want me to know. Oh, she knew I knew them, but she just never wanted me to hear these things about her life spoken of with such flippancy and filth. But then that something in Maxwell which had made me love him even after he had accused me of being a Lesbian came out. . . . "Nona, don't sob so. You'll make it worse for Evelyn. This is one of the hardest things she's ever had to do, this leaving you. . . ." I had to take his word for it, since she hadn't said anything. "Come on, kid, you're messing up her bed and pillow, and look, you're getting my tie all wet! Come on,

darling, be strong because Evelyn won't be here for much longer. . . ."

"Evelyn!" Fairfax screamed with nervous hilarity, as though he were jealous that Maxwell was whispering to me and was anxious to get back into the conversation. "Evelyn, here, catch! I bought you some diaphragms. *Bon voyage*, ha-ha-ha. . . ."

"Oh, damn you, Fairfax. . . ."

"Evelyn, darling, don't get angry with him . . . he's my love, he doesn't mean any harm. Well, let's leave them alone. Come on, Fair. . . . Evelyn, good-by, dear, and write. We'll be thinking of you."

We were finally alone, and I started to cry all over again. "Nona, my dear, come here. . . . Don't, Nona, don't cry or you'll make me cry too." She forced a laugh. "Come, give me the little hands that saved my life, the little hands that soothed me and fed me . . . let me hold them . . . let me see your deep brown eyes, come on . . . they said so much so silently, all the time I was talking for those days and days . . . oh, they're wet now and darker and sadder than before. . . ."

"All ashore! All ashore!"

"No, Nona, not yet. . . . They'll come for you. . . . No, you can't go. Nona, I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for you, you know that, don't you? . . . I don't think I'd want to be. . . . I wouldn't want to be tomorrow or ever if it weren't for you. Do you know that, too? Do you know what you've done for me? . . . Oh, that nod, your beautiful silent nods and smiles, I'll always remember them. . . . The bell sounds so close now. Nona, he's here. The porter is here. . . . No, don't take her . . . she can't go. . . . Nona! . . . Nona!"

"Mrs. McKenna, I'm sorry but the guests must get off now."

"You can't take her from me. Nona! Nona! . . ."

"Evelyn, I love you. I love you with all my heart. It's just good-by for a while . . . it's just for a while." Oh, God that it were.

"No . . . Nona! Nona! . . . Nona!"

XXIV

Maxwell and Fairfax had waited for me on the pier and without saying anything Maxwell came over and let me bury my head in his jacket and cry, and he didn't say "Don't cry" and he didn't say "Let's go." He just stood there and waited and seemed to understand.

Loud, deep, echoing, thunderous blasts shook the pier each time the whistle blew, and finally the ship started moving, ever so slowly, almost imperceptibly. But soon it was going, going, going . . . out to the harbor. And then the water looked ominously black and the sun which had been glaring all morning was hidden by a cloud and it was all too planned, too stagey. But we had said good-by so many times when I didn't think I'd ever see her again. Surely this was just another one of those times. Surely any moment she'd appear on the dock and say, "Oh, Nona, darling, now stop that sobbing. I'm right here. I just did that to test you, to see how you could take it. Now come, we have lots of things to do . . . I've got to take you down to Swarthmore and . . ." and I even looked around in the crowd expecting to see her.

The water in the place where the ship had been was full of visitors' passes and cigarette stubs and scum, and then I knew that it meant that Evelyn was in some awful scum

herself. So all right, maybe I *was* distressed, but at least I had Maxwell to hold me and pat me and let me know that someone cared and understood. But whom did she have? Just a bed with a hard pillow that didn't have any familiar smell to it to sob into for hours, and just that porter to say, "Mrs. McKenna, dinner is now being served. . . . Mrs. McKenna, would you like some ice?"

I couldn't stand it any more and I said good-by to Maxwell and Fairfax. Anyway it was getting late and I had to start for Rockport.

"Nona, you can't possibly drive in that condition . . . now don't be totally irrational. You're trembling and every time you'll think about her when you're driving you'll start to cry and you can't drive very well like that. Come on, *darling*, how would you like to come home with Fair and me and have a drink and then later in the evening you can call your friend. You can leave and get there late."

Maxwell . . . Evelyn . . . weren't they one and the same? Wasn't this her oldest and dearest friend? Weren't her last words to him, "Maxwell, take care of Nona! She's the dearest thing in this world to me."

"No, Maxwell, I've got to go. I'm supposed to call my parents when I get there and I've just got to go." Just then I felt like Evelyn, the time she had said all that business about how she couldn't stay in my apartment. I wanted to go home with Maxwell then more than anything. To have him hug me and care about me and talk for hours about how wonderful Evelyn was, about the adventures they'd had all these years, about all the things she might have said about me. I wanted Maxwell to beg me to go home with him, and I guess I knew he would or I'd

never have risked saying, "Leave me alone, Maxwell. Let me go. I've got to go."

"Nona, darling, I know you. Really I do. I understand. Now come on, we do want you to come home with us and we'll talk about Evelyn all you like and you can have a drink and rest and then when you're feeling better you can leave. Come on now."

So we started driving to Maxwell's, and I felt something was wrong, that I shouldn't have come. It had started hailing, a summer storm which had come in suddenly and violently, bouncing gigantic hail balls down exactly like that storm on the last day in Middleton. The storm just didn't seem to be an accident, and it was then, while the hail balls were falling and I was wishing frantically that it could be the last hail storm—when Evelyn was drying her toes with my sweater and smoking and talking about Dickens—it was then that I found out how old Evelyn was.

"Maxwell, what I can't understand is why she's giving up when she's so young. Why, she's just throwing herself away in dissipation and promiscuity. She's so young. . . ."

"What do you mean 'young,' Nona? What the hell do you think she is, a kid? . . . Oh, no, don't tell me she gave you that old story . . . God, those window wipers are driving me crazy . . . tell me, how old do you think she is?"

"Well, I happen to *know* how old she is, Maxwell, and it's not that I wouldn't tell you but it's just very important to Evelyn that no one should know. . . . I *know* how old she is."

"Then how the hell can you say she's so young? She's old enough to be . . . well, anyway, Nona, you damn well

better realize right now that if there's anything to be known about Evelyn I know it, and I damn well know her age, too, so why don't you just tell me your figure and we'll see what it is, mmm?"

"Well, all right, Maxwell, but do you swear that you'll never tell her that I told you? Never? . . . All right. Well, I thought, I simply thought all summer long that she was thirty-five. . . ."

"*Thirty-five!* . . . aaaaahhh haaah ha," he wheezed, laughing, then coughing, then wheezing and choking again. "Thirty-five! . . . and I thought she told me you were intelligent! *Thirty-five!* Jesus!"

"Let me finish. I kind of had this firm feeling that she was thirty-five, but then one day I saw her license . . ."

"Oh, no, you weren't fooled by *that*, were you? . . . aaahhah. . . . Don't you know she wouldn't put her real age on that thing for her life?"

"Maxwell, what are you saying? The license said, well, I shouldn't really tell you, but hell, who else in the world can I talk to about her? . . . say, Fairfax, you won't tell, will you? . . ." He wildly nodded no. "Well, the license said forty-two!"

"What the hell are you so stunned about, Nona? It's a big fat poetic lie. You're stunned over nothing but a lie! You want to be really stunned? Tell her, Fair, tell her. . . ."

"Okay, kid, listen to this! Evelyn is merely fifteen years older than the license says, that's all. . . . Now that wasn't so bad, was it? So what? So she's fifty-seven. Haven't you ever heard of anyone being fifty-seven before? . . . Maxwell, you'd better drive, she looks pale. . . ."

"Forget it, Maxwell, I'll just pull over for a minute. I'm fine, just fine."

I wasn't fine at all. Evelyn had kept something from me. I knew about almost every man she had ever been with. She had told me about her conversion, described Steve's birth, even talked about her alcoholism. Then why the secrecy about her age? . . . Oh, poor Evelyn. Poor, poor Evelyn. No wonder she didn't open that box of Tampax all summer. No wonder she didn't have to buy a box for the boat. No wonder she'd never taken off her bra. She hadn't kept anything from me. That wasn't right. She must have felt I loved her so much, and trusted her, and accepted her that maybe she was afraid that if I really knew it would change something. But it wouldn't have. It wouldn't have changed anything. She was still Evelyn, and still the same person with the same everything except years. But her age didn't shock me. At least not much. Most of the shock was over Maxwell. . . . Poor Evelyn! I just hope you never find out that your friend, your oldest and dearest treasured friend, has betrayed you. And if once . . . God knows how often. Oh, Evelyn, don't expose yourself to the world. Even to me. To anyone. You'll never know what they'll do or what they'll say. Hear me, Evelyn, I beg of you. Listen to me. I'm talking to you now from my car. It's smoky and rank in here just as it was that last day in Middleton. The hailstones are falling now, too. Everything is too planned, too frighteningly systematic . . . and I'm weeping, and next to me is Maxwell and next to him is that disgusting Fairfax, and I'm begging you to hear me, Evelyn. Not in England or Greece or wherever you go—don't confide in them or anybody. They don't care. They never

will care. Tell God if you have to, but not these so-called friends. You're above them and they'll never reach you. Never.

I really did feel these things but, besides, I loved to get terribly dramatic like that to myself because even though it was only to myself I had a feeling that someone was appreciating it. Someone could tell, maybe by my expression, that I was suffering, and then they'd feel sorry. Feel that they actually were in the company of a suffering person. So sometimes I'd just throw myself into the throes of internal hysteria and prayer and desperate screaming out to someone who would never hear, and somehow, for some reason, I'd feel purged after it all. It wasn't *just* an act. I mean I partly meant it, but mostly I did it as kind of an exercise, to show myself that I could suffer. Sometimes I'd feel guilty because I wasn't suffering as much as someone else, so I'd prove to myself by these exercises in hysteria that I *could* suffer, not only as much but even *more* than the next one. I guess just now I had to prove it to myself very badly. I had this thing just aching in my heart, making my heart really hurt under my sweaty, dirty blouse which was all full of the dust and lint of her clothes and baggage, about how terribly much poor, helpless Evelyn must be suffering way out there alone in the harbor on a ship full of married couples and families, everyone holding hands and clinking glasses, everyone drinking and making love. . . . And what right did I have to be sitting with her dearest friend, a great poet, her dearest confidant, taking him from her, enjoying him . . . while she was suffering. So, damn it, I was suffering, too. See, look at me, Maxwell and Fairfax. See, I'm so upset I can't even drive. She's not the only one

who is suffering. Those people out there on the pier begging for pennies from the passengers, they're not the only ones. And you, if either of you has the capacity to suffer, you're not the only ones either . . . because, you see, there's *me.*

There's no doubt . . . now I know. She really *is* going to die. I knew it in Middleton when I thought she was thirty-five. I knew it when I learned she was forty-two. And now I knew it more than anyone could know anything because I knew she was fifty-seven. And so I'm going. As soon as I can get passage and a passport I'm going, or she'll die. I'm the only one who can help her. I can take on the whole problem and really help her. Herb said no. He said no one could help her. He said her problems were of long standing and had deep complications and that probably even a professional couldn't help her. Herb's usually right, but just now I'm not so sure. There's no substitute for pure simple love and patience, and who else just now would be willing to give it to her?

"You sure you can drive, Nona?"

"I'm okay now."

"Well, then, turn right and then make a left, down the alley."

Was I really with the poet Maxwell Saber? Was he genuinely concerned about me? Did he really want to take me home, to care for me and love me? Oh, the Lesbian accusation and all the rest of it was okay because he was Maxwell Saber. Now I thought I knew what Evelyn meant when she had said that sort of well-he's-a-poet-so-we-must-excuse-him business. Now even I could excuse him. But Fairfax I didn't know about. There was nothing good about him that could justify his slimy insecurity and

effeminate mannerisms. On Maxwell they were almost attractive, but every time I looked at Fairfax . . . well, I felt sick. There was something fawning and weak about him. At least Maxwell was a homosexual—and proud of it. But Fairfax seemed to want everyone to know that he adored Maxwell on the one hand, and on the other hand to speak of his conquests in the female world as though he wasn't quite sure it was all right to be a homosexual. He had once slept with some movie actress whom I had never heard of, and that was supposed to make him just great. But it made him sickeningly revolting to me, but revolting in a sad way, and that's what caused all the trouble; I began to feel sorry for Fairfax.

"Oh, my God, Maxwell, didn't anyone help you clean up after the party last night? The place is a mess!"

"Oh, don't touch a thing, Nona. Let's just strip and have some gin . . . Sarah will clean up when she comes back. She works nights, you know, at the city desk."

"Uh, I don't think I'll take anything off, Maxwell; I'm pretty comfortable just now. And I'd better not drink. You know, I've got to drive to Massachusetts today."

"Come on, Nona, have a drink . . . It'll cool you off. . . . What do you suppose she's doing now?"

"I dunno, Maxwell. What do *you* suppose she's doing now?"

"I dunno, Fair. . . . Here, Nona, have another drink. . . ."

Five gin-and-tonics later, "Maxwell, I really do have to go . . . it's getting late . . ."

"No, no, no, Nona, you can't go. . . . Oh, Fair, tell her . . . oh, ha ha ha ha, Fair, tell her about the time with George. . . .

Nona, you've got to listen to this. This is the best one of all. You know George Lovell, don't you, that beautiful poet? Of course you do. Well, he's been one of my lovers for *years*, just years, and one night Evelyn was here, and the place was full of all the queers in New York, and everyone was telling George that he was a liar when he said that he had once slept with a woman, and he was screaming that he wasn't a liar, and poor old Evelyn felt so sorry for him that she took him into the back room and spent the whole night with him and . . . ha ha ha, oh ho ha, I can't tell her, Fair, you tell her . . . no, no, Fair, I'll tell her . . . well, you ought to have seen our pure little Evelyn the next morning . . . she was haggard, remember, Fair? She . . ."

"There's no more gin, Maxwell, will you and Nona take Scotch?"

"Sure. . . . Nona, you mean Evelyn never told you about that time she tried to make a man out of George Lovell?"

"No, Maxwell." And I thought, what right do you have to tell it to me either, but I couldn't feel my fingers, and I didn't care that I was naked, and I didn't care that they had only their pants on. I mean I was too fascinated and surprised to care in any embarrassed sense and, besides, nothing was going to happen because Evelyn had told them to take care of me, and nothing could possibly happen. *Nothing.*

"Maxwell, it really is getting late. . . . I've just got to leave." But when I fell over my shoes in trying to get to my dress I knew I couldn't go. I went to the phone.

"Ellen, this is Nona. Listen, I can't come up tonight. I'm drunk. . . . Well, what did you expect? She left today. . . . Well, anyway, I'm terribly drunk and I don't

really know what you're saying. God, Ellen, everything you're saying sounds like it's echoing . . . oh, God, am I sick! I don't really know what I'm saying either, but call my parents person-to-person for me and then they'll know I'm there. D'ya know what I mean? Ellen, did you know that Evelyn Gordon McKenna, you know, the professor at Masefield . . . oh, yes, of course, you know her . . . anyway, did you know that she goes to bed with homosexuals to try to see if they can't sleep with women? Isn't that terrible? . . .Oh, God, I shouldn't have said that. What's the matter with me! Ellen, forget it, please. Can you forget it? Really try to forget it. . . . Don't forget to call my parents. See you tomorrow . . . about lunchtime . . . and Ellen, please don't tell your mother . . . I mean don't tell her why I can't come tonight. . . . 'By."

"How far out do you think she is now?"

"I dunno, Fair, what do you think?"

"I dunno either. . . ."

"What do you think she's doing now, right this minute?"

"I dunno, Fair, what do you think?"

"Jesus, you just asked me that. How the hell should I know! Why don't you call her and see?"

"Hey, you want to call her, Nona? She's probably missing you like hell. . . ."

"But, Maxwell, you said you're already in debt over the party. . . ."

"Oh, the hell with the money, you want to speak to her?"

"Yeah."

"Fair?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, we'll call."

"Operator, I said ship-to-shore. Hell, then, then shore-to-ship. Would you hurry, please? . . . Then call us back."

"There's the phone, Maxwell. Shall I take it?"

"No, Fair. I've got to tell her about Nona. . . . Evelyn? Is that you, dear? I've just got to tell you that Nona is just the most beautiful little friend you've ever had. I don't see how you could possibly have left her . . . Oh, we're telling her all sorts of wonderful things about you, dear, and she's been telling us all the wonderful things that happened while you lived together in Middleton. . . . But I want you to speak to her now. . . ."

"Evelyn? Hi! How are you?"

"Fine, dear, and thank you for your gifts. . . ."

"Oh, you're welcome. Did you open everything?"

"Yes. How are *you*?"

"Oh, everything's fine here . . . but we miss you terribly, that's all. . . ."

"Oh, well, let me speak to Maxwell."

"All right. Maxwell, she wants to speak to you again."

"Yes, Evelyn? Sure, we'll take care of her, dear. Don't worry, we'll take care of her."

". . . Oh, Maxwell, thank you so much for letting me call. Really, thanks so much."

"What the hell are you talking about, 'thank you.' Don't thank me. You know that anything that's mine is yours, ha ha ha . . . my money, my lovers, my house, my liquor, ha ha haa."

My tongue was numb. I didn't have any teeth and I couldn't move my arms. One was hanging off the side of the couch weighed down by my hand, like a ball of lead.

The other hand was on my breasts. I wanted to make sure they were still there. Everything had been so strange and horrendous. Through a long tunnel I had heard strange echoes of words knocking each other around in my head. Maxwell's voice was at the other end of the tunnel and there was a glaring light out there too and I had asked Maxwell to turn it off and he had said it was a lamp in the apartment across the terrace. And sometimes while he was speaking his voice would fade out and all I could hear were the voices on the street throbbing in my temples. My breasts were still there. My teeth hadn't come back yet. It wasn't really Fairfax' fault. Maxwell had asked him to do it, and I hadn't resisted because I was so numb and because I needed so much to be close to someone so I'd know I was still alive. Somewhere through the tunnel Maxwell had told Fair to do it, and while it was happening Maxwell's laughing kept making me want to clap my hands over my ears but my hands were too heavy to move. I think Fairfax tried to bite my ear but it didn't really hurt. I don't think I had any ears either. The coffee table looked like an underwear counter in a store. Except all this underwear was soiled. Spotted. But the same spots that were on the underwear were on the curtains when I looked at them and on the Picasso print when I looked at it. "We'd better stop now," Fairfax had said to me. "We'd better stop now because you're tired, *darling*." Maxwell touched the hand that was on my breasts and said goodnight, goodshow, goodnight-goodshow . . . and everything kept happening the same way when I was asleep so I didn't really know if I was asleep or not. But I do remember that my teeth still hadn't come back by the time I did fall asleep.

XXV

Everyone was sleeping in the morning, about six, so I quickly got dressed, left a note for Maxwell, and started up to Rockport. I couldn't believe the way I felt. I mean I almost didn't realize what had happened. It was as though I had just spent the evening baby-sitting or watching TV or reading a pretty bad novel. It was a kind of amnesia with me that made me feel I really hadn't done anything. I just remembered something sort of unpleasant and was shocked to see how shocked Ellen was when I told her. That began to make me realize that something a hell of a lot worse than I realized had happened.

I spent several days sitting on the huge quarries looking out to the ocean and wondering . . . how she was . . . where she was . . . if I could possibly catch up to the ship if I started swimming . . . if one of those motor launches would take me out . . . or where would I get the money to take a plane and meet her ship at Le Havre. Money . . . money . . . I wonder if I have enough . . . yes, six dollars, so I called her shore-to-ship.

"Evelyn, hi, I just wanted to tell you I love you."

"Oh, Nona, dear, how sweet. What's new, dear?"

"After I spoke to you the other night, Maxwell made Fairfax sleep with me on the couch. It was horrible."

"What?"

"I said . . ."

"Yes, I know, I heard you. Nona, listen. Stay away from them. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Evelyn, you said 'Stay away from them.' "

"Nona, listen carefully. *Avoid all things not aesthetic.*"

"All right, Evelyn. Anything else?"

"No, dear . . . just work hard at school. You know how much faith I'm putting in you."

"Okay, Evelyn. 'By."

"Remember, darling, remember what I said. Good-by."

But my fantasies were getting much too wild, being in Rockport with the ocean. Every time we went swimming I'd go far, far out, hoping Ellen would lose sight of me so I'd be able to just keep going, going to Le Havre. And no matter how ridiculous this seemed to me in bed at night, or even on the quarries looking out, it didn't seem the least bit ridiculous to me while I was in the water.

I had to leave Rockport on Labor Day. I left a long letter with Ellen addressed to Evelyn in case I was killed in the Labor Day traffic. And I tried. I mean I took the busiest roads and went in the fastest lane on the turnpike and even picked up two sailors who were hitching rides to New York fantasizing that maybe they'd hold me up, kill me or something, and take the car. But nothing happened. Everything was very peaceful and calm. And before I got to the turnpike, before I picked up the sailors, I drove through Middleton.

Masefield was deserted. There wasn't a single person on campus, and the bookstores were all closed. It was dead. So I parked the car and went over to the big elm under

which I had spent so many hours sitting and looking into poetry books, because I knew that Evelyn would be walking by any minute. And I tried it again. I had met a lot of people that way. "Oh, I see you're reading Stevens," someone would say, and then sit down and talk. But there was no one to do that today, and no matter how closely I concentrated on the little path from the museum to the common, no one came along on it. No graceful woman with ebony hair and a feline stride, smoking. No one. It was too quiet to stay. And in all this silence, this frightening stillness, I knew that the end of the summer had come, the end of what then was everything.

The sailors didn't hold me up—in fact, they paid the tolls—and there was no accident. At six P.M. I arrived home, tired, lonely, and frightened.

XXVI

"All right, Nona, you've had a chance to rest, to relax, and now we're going to have our talk."

All of a sudden I felt that my father was superbly wonderful, that deep underneath the bellowing and the crudeness he knew more than anyone in the world, and that he understood far, far more than Evelyn ever could, and that of course whatever he said must be right and that maybe for once I'd shake this juvenile business of always having to fight him and for once listen to him and love him and kiss him and live in peace by doing the few simple things he'd ask. But then I remembered all those horrible, curt, cold shore-to-ship conversations, for I had called Evelyn every day from Rockport, and how each time I had hung up I thought I'd better kill myself because she hadn't said she loved me, she hadn't said she was glad I had called, she hadn't said anything, and then I started to hate, not Evelyn particularly, but just hate anyone and anything that happened to be around at the moment. So I started to hate my father just then. It was so monstrously unfair; I realized it even then. I didn't hate him. I hated Evelyn. But the hate couldn't do anything to Evelyn because she was too far away, and he was right here. So I hated him, but it didn't harm him at all. It was me. I was the one that got hurt.

"Nona, look, I'm not against your leaving college and going to the New School if you think that you'll be any happier or do any better . . ."

And there he was, lovingly, gently, carefully trying ever so hard to understand me and not to scream, and I heard myself say, "The hell you're not against it. You don't even know a damn thing about colleges. What right do you have to say you're not against it? You don't even know enough to be for it."

"Now wait a minute, Nona, do you think that's fair? I'm trying to have a calm discussion with you. I'm not against you, Nona, I'm for you. Believe me, I love you and I want the very best for you."

"Oh, come on, Dad, let's not go into that. I just can't stand it when you say that."

"Well, what do you want me to say? You always *want* me to say something. You always want to hear what you want to hear. Well, sometimes, Nona, we have to listen to things we don't exactly want to hear."

"Well, I don't, and I'm not going to, either."

"All right, Nona. . . . Now I'm afraid I'm going to have to get a little tough."

"*Get* a little tough! Ha! What do you think you *have* been?"

"Exactly what do you mean?"

"Calling up like a lunatic at four in the morning and demanding that I should come home. God! You sounded like a crazy lunatic on the phone."

Oh, Daddy, try and hear all the things I'm not saying. That if you hadn't called I would have wanted you to. I would have wanted you somehow to have shown that you

were concerned and worried and that you loved me. Please don't scream back at me just because I'm screaming at you. Really, I don't know why I am. I hear myself but I can't do anything about it. I know what you think of Evelyn and you're right. But don't scream, please don't scream.

"Well, I suppose you wouldn't understand, Nona, but I couldn't very well like it when I heard that my daughter was taking care of a far-gone alcoholic."

"No, I wouldn't understand, and how could you possibly understand?" I shouted to him. "These are artists—Evelyn, for example, she's an artist, a writer, a scholar—and how could you possibly understand the sensibilities of such people, you with your bourgeois morality?"

"Bourgeois morality, is it? Look, Nona, don't start with your goddamn 'bourgeois morality' business."

I'm sorry, Dad, really I am, but I just can't say it. Please hear me, though. I can't say it now but I want to. I'm sorry. "Bourgeois morality." It's a term I heard Maxwell use, and I can't even tell you about Maxwell because he's too vile to even tell you about, to have in the same room with you, even in thought. I don't even know what it means. Really, Dad, please, please. . . .

"And I'll take whatever courses I want at the New School, and I'll cultivate whatever friendships I please."

"Nona, I've had just about enough of this. You are to go to the New School if that's what you want, but if you don't come out with the marks that you need, then you can look forward to working next semester, because I'm not going to subsidize a loafer forever. And you can damn well cultivate the friendships you please. If you want to ruin your life, go right ahead. Maybe if you listened to your parents once in a

while you wouldn't be floundering from school to school now, and you'd have a lot of nice, young, normal college friends."

"Normal college friends! What an interesting life *that* would make. Normal college friends! Have you ever sat in a dormitory listening to normal college girls talking about normal college things? Well, if you had, you'd know. You should be flattered that people like Evelyn are even interested in me."

"Well, maybe I'm totally obtuse, Nona, but I'm not flattered. Not in the least. If you'll excuse me I'm going out. It's getting awfully cold in here."

That meant that for at least the next four weeks we'd pass each other without a word, without a glance, and then gradually, in about a month, we'd start clumsily asking each other "How's school" or "How's business," and then just as things were getting un-clumsy again and good and smooth, there would be another one of these battles that really didn't have to be fought at all, and then everything would be wrecked all over again.

I made sure he had left, and then I ran next door to Helen. I needed her so much now. And it was all because of Evelyn. But I really knew it wasn't. And that meant that I'd have to love Evelyn twice as much as usual to make up for all the bad things I had thought of her that day. So a long letter, and even a phone call, and then I felt as though I didn't have to be guilty about thinking badly of her and hating her.

As soon as school started I was too busy to be bothered by the silence at home. I tried never to come home, and when I did it was easy to go upstairs to work. Not that I worked, unless writing ten-page letters to Evelyn was work,

but at least I didn't have to stay downstairs. And then the first exam. I had to stay up all night. Not that I was learning anything, but so that my father could see how terribly serious I was. And at about four in the morning the phone rang.

"Hello. . . ."

"Long distance calling Miss Nona Greene."

"This is Nona Greene speaking."

"Can you talk a little louder? I can't hear you."

"I can't. Everyone is sleeping here."

"I have a collect call for you from Mrs. Evelyn McKenna in Florence, Italy. Will you accept the charges?"

"Uh—yes. Yes, sure."

"Go ahead, please."

"Nona?"

"Evelyn? What's the matter?"

"Nothing, dear. I just wanted to tell you that I haven't had a chance to write to you but I will tomorrow."

"Is that all you called about? I don't care about that, Evelyn." Like hell I didn't care. It was all I lived for. Sometimes I'd drive all the way home in the middle of the day from working in the library just to get the mail, and there wouldn't be any. "Really, Evelyn, I understand. Is that all you wanted to say?"

"Well, I wanted to see how you were."

"But, Evelyn, do you know that it's four in the morning here?"

"Is it really? How strange. It's ten in the morning here. Oh, how terribly, terribly foolish of me."

"No, not at all, Evelyn. It's perfectly okay. I was studying anyway. . . . Do you need anything, Evelyn?"

"Oh, well, that was the next thing I was going to tell you.

You know, Nona, I was terribly sick on the ship—migraines and all that—and I needed a doctor when I got to Florence."

"But, Evelyn, do you have enough money for that?"

"That's it, Nona, I was wondering . . ."

"Sure, Evelyn, sure. . . . How much do you need?"

"Well, is a hundred too much?"

"No, are you sure that's all?"

"Well. . . ."

"All right, Evelyn, I'll send you two hundred."

"But, darling, do you *have* that much?"

"Well, Evelyn, I've got it, but it was going for your ticket for Christmas. I've borrowed it all from friends and . . ."

"Oh, darling, how simply lovely! Well, forget about Christmas. It was very sweet of you, but I just couldn't accept such a thing. Can you cable it to me right away? I'll send it back as soon as I can."

"Well, when do you need it?"

"I need it in two hours, by noontime."

"In two hours! What's the matter, Evelyn, are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Don't ask me such questions, Nona. I just want you to cable it immediately."

"Okay, okay. The cable office doesn't open until six. I'll get down there as soon as it opens. Evelyn, Evelyn, don't forget . . . I've got a passport now, so if you need me . . ."

"Just cable me the money, darling. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me? Oh, how's school going?"

"Fine, just fine."

"All right, darling. 'By-'by."

"'By."

"Nona . . ." My father walked into the room. "Nona, what was all that about?"

"Oh, Dad. Don't tell me you were listening to the whole thing."

"Well, what else do you expect me to do? The walls aren't much more than tissue paper, you know."

"Well, then, why are you asking me what it was about? You know."

"You're damn right I know. You're not going to cable any money to that woman."

"I certainly am. She's expecting it."

"I forbid it."

"Why don't you forbid something else? I've already promised her."

"Nona, goddamn it, if one more cent goes out of this house to that woman I'm cutting you off. Do you hear? And I mean it."

I don't know why I couldn't make my father believe that Evelyn would return the money. She said she'd return it. Now why in the world was he making such a fuss? She said she'd return it as soon as she could, and that would probably just mean a few weeks, until she'd get her Foundation increment. And my father kept telling me when the hell was I going to learn that when it comes to money and sex you can never trust your own brother!

"But Evelyn isn't like that, Dad. She said she'd return it and she will."

And she did. It came registered mail one morning at six and then he was easier to live with, and somehow he turned a lighter shade of green whenever I'd get a letter from Europe, and somehow he became milder about the whole

subject of Evelyn Gordon McKenna. But not very much milder.

But maybe he was right. I mean sometimes I got pretty disgusted myself. Every week I would put five and sometimes ten dollars into one of my letters, and sometimes she'd say she got it. Not thank you, just, "I received your five dollars today, dear." And then it became habitual; I couldn't stop sending it and she couldn't start thanking me. And I'd hate her. But then I'd take out my picture of her, the one I had pasted together from the garbage can in Middleton, and I couldn't hate her. I simply couldn't. It wasn't fair to her. I'd have to find someone else.

But I did hate her as much as I loved her. Whenever I'd get a letter from her I'd love her so much that I could have screamed with rage at having to be separated from her, and then again I could have screamed with hate because she didn't say anything about the Maxwell business. She didn't say, "Oh, you poor darling, what an awful, unspeakable thing." She never mentioned it, and then I almost felt as though what had been the use of going through it. I mean, I hadn't thought like that while I was going through it; I wasn't thinking then at all. But now, after it all, the least I could do was to get pity and sympathy from whomever I told, Evelyn especially. And I expected more than that. I expected Evelyn and everyone else to spit fires of hatred in Maxwell's direction and give long harangues about how utterly monstrous Maxwell was and, of course, Fairfax. I wanted everyone to hate them and love me, and to think of me as weak and frail and completely taken advantage of. But no one who mattered showed any interest. And some people dropped me entirely. I wasn't very selective about

whom I told, and some people just couldn't take it. And, of course, there were the Evelyns who took it but didn't say anything, who made it seem a complete waste of time for me to have gone through with it in the first place. Indifference was the worst reaction anyone could show. But then I thought of what reaction I would *really* like best. I guess it would be the one my father would have if I ever told him. Complete violence and hatred and disgust. Almost a murderous rage.

And who in the world ended up showing this wonderful reaction? I couldn't tell my father, of course, so I told the person who I hoped would play the role of my father, and who quite obligingly did. Steven McKenna. He told me Maxwell and Fairfax ought to be horsewhipped, that they were no less than criminals for taking advantage of a young unhappy girl, and that they ought to be sent away for it. He was furious. I loved him so much. I didn't see his pimply face any more. I forgot the violence he displayed over his mother's drinking. I forgot the indifference he showed to her thirst for affection. I forgot almost everything, and I loved him very much for being my father.

And after Steve's wonderfully satisfying attention, after I had had the father of my dreams for a few short hours, Evelyn wrote all about Maxwell. But by then I didn't need it, at least not the way I had needed it before. But it was so good, so good to know she at least thought about it.

Nona, darling:

Perhaps you wonder at my silence about Maxwell. Sometimes when things mean so much to us we can't bear to even think of them. But it is impossible for me not to think of it,

and today, walking by the Arno, I thought a great deal. Maxwell, and Sarah (and one has to take them together, which is another very concrete complication) have been a symbol for many years for many people. For instance, they took Paul Knightly in when he was pounding the sidewalks and writing a novel. They took Clarence Norman in when he was struggling to paint and exist at the same time—to get him a job. Sarah taught him a great deal and now he is a world-famous inventive artist in films. And there was Alfred Cooley—and many others. If they had had money, together with this significant instinct for talent and for unstinting generosity, it would have been different. But they had so little themselves. There tragedy is the symbolic, American cultural tragedy. There's something terribly strange in it all —the deterioration that gnaws away at people in America. Perhaps because so much energy is dangerously drawn off in sheer battling to keep intact the commitment to an ideal of art as value, and to keep the mob out of one's nerves. Distortions set in—one repudiates the bourgeois values, lock, stock, and barrel, and the central bourgeois virtues tend to become lost. It is all such a horrible, blundering sacrifice. Sarah had her peasant religion to keep her grasp on the external body of reality. But Maxwell had only his German physical stamina. His talent as a poet went down the drain first; next came Communism, and then, when Communism's god failed, his last obsession exulted in the name of Eros. (How pathetic a defiance!) Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that Maxwell is more than his single self, to anyone who has lived through that story. And so I find myself thinking of him on two entirely different levels; his personal deterioration and his symbolic history.

That's all about Maxwell, Nona, and I think you should try to see what I'm saying. But now about you. . . . I think in your long fight over the past years to achieve a positive life-giving relationship with your environment, your salvation has been your lovingness of nature and the desperate faith in goodness and truth and vitality that your lovingness gave you. But this in itself has led to a confusion—the confusion of the impulse of love with the way life is arranged. Life is not arranged, in its necessities, around your impulse of love and your desperate faith in it. You must not confuse that impulse with the good that you seek, for the good that you seek can only be found in the way life is arranged. Do you see what I mean? Oh, Nona, dear, I just put my face down in my hands and cry over this, thinking about it all again. You don't know how I ache over this thing, how traumatic it has been to me, when I know how lovely you are, and to have this trailing you around, through my fault, fault of ignorance, but fault nevertheless.

I must leave this now.
All my love,
Evelyn

This was the perfect reaction. Even more perfect than my father's could have been, or than Steve's was. And it made everything possible again. There was no hate left after that letter, and maybe she knew that. Maybe she knew how I would feel and maybe that's why, that next night at the New School . . .

". . . hence, Wolfe had no sense of proportion. He had paranoic delusions. His books are not tame. He felt that he

quarreled with her because she in some way possessed him, that he was caught in something that . . ."

"Excuse me, Dr. Levine, but the office sent me up with a message. I'm terribly sorry to interrupt, but it's an emergency."

Oh, what poor person is going to get bad news in a setting like this? Levine sitting up there picking his nose, everybody turning pages in their notebooks, that poor guy standing up there, flushed, trying to make out the scrawl of one of the ladies in the office . . .

"I'm sorry, but it seems as though someone is dying in Europe. Is there a Nona Greene in the class? . . . Oh, would you come with me, please."

My throat went dry. It was totally parched and hurt a lot. "Who said someone was dying in Europe?"

"The office received a message and the girl said to get you out and tell you to call this number. I'm sorry, kid. It's a bad break."

"Yeah . . . thanks . . ."

"Ellen, what is it? They called me out and gave me your number to call. . . . What did she cable you for? . . . At least she knows how my father feels, that's a help. . . . If she only said she was sick, why did the man from the office say she was dying? . . . You mean he wouldn't have interrupted the class to tell me someone was very sick? . . . Good Lord. . . . So what to do now, Ellen? What can I do? . . . No, I can't possibly go back to class now. Anyway, it's almost over. Can I come over to your place? . . . All right then, I'll be right there."

The car would have taken too long to park, so I jumped into a cab.

"I just think it's hopeless, Nona. Your going over can't do anything."

"But, Ellen, she wouldn't have asked me . . . I mean she wouldn't have cabled me like this if she didn't want me to come over. Oh, Ellen, I've got to go. I've just got to."

And at Herb's: "Nona, dear, I've said about all I have to say. The decision is yours. You know how I feel, what I think. I've told you what I think will happen. Now, Nona, face it as you wish and make your own decision."

It wasn't a very hard decision to make, because I didn't consider that there was a decision at all. I had to go, and I would. There was four hundred dollars in my desk. That would certainly be enough to get me over. "But that's what she wants of you," Ellen had said, "your money. She doesn't want *you*. She won't want you if you don't have something in your wallet when you get there, and you won't if you have only four hundred dollars to start out with."

But I knew a lot more than Ellen did sometimes. I knew that it was me she wanted. And just because she said she was sick, it didn't mean she was drinking. Why everyone always had to assume she was drunk whenever she said she didn't feel well was something I could never understand. But I knew that she was other-than-drinking sick, so I put the money into my passport and got out my drip-dry skirt and my drip-dry blouse and a straw pocketbook that was pretty roomy, and a sweater for over the blouse, and laid everything out, and got into bed.

The bookcases in the room began working on me the way the bookcases in Evelyn's office had affected me at Masefield. I began thinking about who gave me which books . . . under

what circumstances I had read each one . . . and our dog, Rip, sleeping on the floor, would I ever see him again? Would he be alive when I came back? . . . If I came back.

And Mother, God, it would be like killing her. I'd just say, " 'By Ma, I'm going to school; I'll be back tonight, usual time." And then I'd get a plane and send her a cable just before I took the plane saying that I had decided to go to Europe and had sailed that day. That I'd be home soon. And then I pictured what she'd do, how she'd call the Italian line, and then just weep, and I couldn't stand the picture any more. It was such a wet, hysterical picture that I couldn't stand it, and for a moment I couldn't remember what my mother looked like. So I jumped out of bed and yanked her picture off the wall . . . but the space was too obvious, too horrible to leave to them, so I put it back and ran downstairs to the family albums where there were other pictures. I chose the same picture of her that was hanging in my room and started back upstairs. But then I thought . . . what if I get slaughtered or something in Europe and they have to identify my body? What if my father had to go through my purse and found a picture of Mother and not of him? It would be a horrible way to lose a daughter, thinking that she didn't even care enough to want to look at him sometimes—not even once—the whole time. So I went back down again and put a small picture of him in my wallet, just in case . . . just in case he'd look, or maybe just in case I would.

But lying in bed looking at Mother's picture wasn't very real. I knew she was in the next room, and yet I knew that actually she was already as far away as she would be when I'd leave. So I found myself doing something I hadn't done

since I was three or so. I called for her. Quickly I turned out the light and curled under the blankets and called "Mother . . . Ma . . . Ma . . ." Then I remembered that sometimes, when I was three, my father would come in instead, and I'd either let him give me the water so I wouldn't hurt his feelings, or I'd say that I had a secret to tell and only Mother could hear it. But now if he came in I couldn't say that. What would I do if he came and I . . . "Oh, Mother. . . ."

"What's the matter, darling? Do you want water?"

"Okay, Ma."

"Here, now. . . . What's the matter, dear? You haven't done this in so long. Did you have a bad dream?"

"Oh, Ma, I'm so upset . . . yes, yes, I had a bad dream. Ma, would you sleep in here tonight . . . please?"

"Of course, darling, of course I will."

So of course I didn't sleep. I watched her all night. And every time I felt my eyes begin to close I'd remind myself that a week from now I might give anything in the world for a glance at my mother, and now I could have all I wanted, so I'd better take in as much as I could.

And she kissed me as only my mother could kiss me, and I felt happy, the happy feeling that only she could give. And I knew nothing wrong could happen. And we spoke about having lunch together in the city, and perhaps going to the opera together some evening. We spoke of Thanksgiving and whom we would be having for dinner . . . and all the while I was shouting "Good-by" to her and she couldn't hear it. I felt like Cio-Cio-San saying good-by to her little Trouble, not really telling him where she was going but just desperately, lovingly, saying good-by, and Mother, Trouble, having such faith, such trust, suspecting nothing.

I was scared when I kissed Mother good-by that day. Once I kissed her it would be finished. I couldn't change my mind. It was like sealing a letter. Kissing Mother was sealing one episode, and the next one was irrevocably upon me. "Darling, you shouldn't let exams get you so, you're trembling."

"I know, Mother, I know. I'll be all right." And I ran out of the house as fast as I could, and took the bus for a while, and then changed to a cab.

XXVII

Idlewild had three flights leaving that day, with openings on the evening flight only. That meant I had almost twelve hours to kill. I made the reservation and sat down. The airport was full of families saying good-by to someone, or businessmen with valises, or couples parting. Somehow everyone looked as though his departure had been sanctioned, either by a firm or a father. It must be so wonderful to go to Europe and feel as though you're going because you've chosen to go, and going with the love and blessings of someone, someone who cares and someone who knows. What if something went wrong? What if my father had the police waiting for me in Europe? "He wouldn't," Ellen had said. "First of all he doesn't know where Evelyn is, and anyway, he wouldn't. Your father doesn't do things like that, Nona." Well, maybe Ellen was right, but just to make sure I wired my parents late in the afternoon, after I had checked the papers and found both the *Queen Elizabeth* and the *Cristoforo Colombo* sailing. I wired . . .

DEAR MOM AND DAD STOP I MUST GO TO EUROPE FOR A WHILE STOP I AM SAILING TODAY STOP I HAD TO DO IT THIS WAY STOP SHE NEEDS ME VERY MUCH STOP I'LL COME HOME WHEN I CAN IF YOU STILL WANT ME TO STOP LOVE NONA.

So if my father were going to trace me I'd put him off the track. But what if Mother did it? What if Mother did the calling and the tracing. She couldn't. She wouldn't be able to. But she might. I wouldn't want to put *her* off the track. I'd want her to find me. But she wouldn't do it. My father would. The difference is that when he'd find me he'd scream and yell and push and pull, and when she'd find me she'd kiss and hug and cry and laugh. But if anyone were going to trace me he would, so I was able to send the telegram, and anyway, I thought Ellen was probably right. I didn't think my father would bother.

There was a movie house at the airport, so I watched some banal film about the Alamo over and over again and then I heard it . . . "*Flight 403 leaving for Rome. Passengers now boarding through Gate 27-A.*" At first when I had gotten to the airport I'd thought I would never be able to bear the twelve-hour wait, that it would be interminable, and that maybe, maybe I *wouldn't* stand it. Maybe I'd start thinking and think myself right back home. So I was scared at first with the prospect of a twelve-hour wait. But now that it was over, now that the twelfth hour had been announced over the loudspeaker, it seemed as though it had just been a minute, two minutes perhaps, and I so wanted it to be back at ten in the morning, back to the time when I was with Mother, saying good-by while she looked at me, speaking hopefully of all the wonderful times we'd be having together in the city during the winter.

It started to rain as the engines were roaring, and the louder they roared the more drops spattered on the window, although it really didn't seem to make any difference. I mean it wouldn't have mattered if it had been lightning. I

wouldn't have been scared. I think I *wanted* to die. I think I wanted the plane to just drop, drop, drop into that mass of wetness ahead of us . . . quietly and with no pain. I thought if I were to die in the plane, my parents would weep without all the ache they'd have if I were to get into another mess with Evelyn, and somehow, even though I had assured Ellen that I knew Evelyn wasn't drunk, somehow I believed that there was a terrible mess waiting for me at 56 Via Romana. If there had been a choice I think I'd rather have died in that plane than have let myself get dragged down by Evelyn. Yet if she dragged me, I'd go; I just didn't have any better place to go just then. I knew as well as anyone else that I wasn't doing a thing at the New School. A couple of books a week, a couple of poorly-done papers, and absolutely no real work, no real learning. It wasn't that I didn't want to learn or that I didn't want to work—I longed for a routine in which I'd have to work— but since I didn't have one and since I had all day and all week except for a few hours of classes all to myself, I found it much easier to be off in thoughts of Evelyn and Florence than to be down to earth with the problem at hand. I guess it was because I felt the problem at hand was futile. I guess I knew even then that no matter what I did, even if I did get the A's, that something would fall through about Swarthmore, so why bother? I began feeling that I really didn't want to go through college at all, but what-else-do-nineteen-year-old-girls-do? Everyone would ask, and if they didn't ask it they were thinking it. I knew that. So I'd have to go to school or at least pretend to, although it wasn't very gratifying.

What was really on my mind was that mess with Maxwell. I really didn't feel worth anyone or anything. I felt dirty and spoiled, as if I couldn't sit in a dormitory room full of those normal college girls my father had talked about without feeling I'd ruin them too. And I realized that during those long hours I'd sat in the Village espresso places—waiting for someone just to say "Hello"—I realized in an over-all way what had really happened at Masefield. I had started out with a mad fantasy about this absolutely brilliant woman, a fantasy about getting to know her, about speaking-to-her-for-only-an-hour-a-week. And somehow, I still didn't know quite how, the fantasy had become real. And afterwards, after the reality of the fantasy only caused more and more fantasies, after many hours of wanting to die, of crying until my eyes burned, of suffering more than I'd ever known I could suffer, I learned a little something. Because now, in the plane, waiting to take off, dramatically screaming to myself all kinds of farewells to my parents, I wasn't creating the kind of fantasies I was so used to creating. I wasn't picturing Evelyn well and happy and our doing wonderful things in Florence together. Maybe I had learned something from all that had happened, or maybe it was just that all the things Herb and Ellen had warned me about were beginning to take effect, or maybe I was scared and was trying to find reasons for turning back, even if it meant calling my parents from the airport as soon as I landed and telling them that I wanted to come right back, that I'd never leave again, and would they please cable me money so I could come back. But whatever it was, my fantasies were rotten. I mean really rotten. They looked terrible, they even smelled terrible. And

yet there was something fascinating about them, fascinating enough to make me want to pursue them, to see them through as I had at Masefield and maybe learn a little more, maybe learn enough this time so that I'd really understand, so that I'd really know whether my place was with her, doing whatever I always could to keep her alive and well and maybe happy, or whether it was with my parents, *with myself*, going through school . . . and from there I didn't know. But maybe, maybe I'd know soon.

XXVIII

The train from Rome to Florence was surprisingly fast and got there in about three hours. It wasn't that I cared about time. I hadn't even realized how many hours passed on the plane—I had been thinking hard, and dozing, and thinking some more—but the train was so crowded, so much like the New York trains, with the people talking away, except that it wasn't like the New York trains because I couldn't understand what they were talking about. I couldn't overhear fragments of stories as I usually could in New York and piece them together into a fantasy-puzzle of my own. It was just masses and masses of words. Occasionally I'd hear "*quattro*" or "*sempre*" or some word that was familiar to me, but for the most part I couldn't tell what was going on, so the three hours seemed very long, almost longer than the ten hours or so that the plane had taken, partly because of all the Italian, and partly because of the hard leather-upholstered seats, but mostly because of the fantasies. Mostly because I couldn't have any about Evelyn on the train. It was one thing to fantasize about what she'd be like when I was thousands of miles away, but now, speeding along an Italian road, I couldn't imagine anything. I knew that of all the things I could possibly imagine, only one would be the case. I mean, it wasn't like Masefield where I could pretty

nearly make my fantasies do whatever I wanted them to. If I had wanted to take her away to a motel and prolong the whole living-together thing, I could have. If I had wanted to prolong it by keeping her drunk I could have. I could have done so much. But now I knew that it was all going to be different. I was going to be given the situation this time. I wasn't going to be able to create it or even develop it. This time, I was afraid, the situation was already developed and I wasn't going to be the master of it any more. In Middleton, one of the things that had made her so dependent on me was the fact that I had or could get money, and that she had none. Whatever she had she was keeping for her passage. But now, now I had about 12,000 lire, and she, well, she probably didn't even have that much. Now we'd be in such a different situation that I couldn't even begin to fantasize, and that's what made the trip so interminable. My mind was almost sterile. Usually if I looked out a window like this one, especially at scenery so new to me, I'd take in everything, think a million new, exciting things, but instead my eyes looked out of the window, fixed, and nothing was really registering at all. Things were just sort of *there*. I mean my mind was sort of saying *tree, olive tree, bird, sky, gold church,* without really *seeing* the bird or the sky or the gold church. Like a camera that just clicks at everything, not a special scene which the photographer wants to get but just a glob of things, trees or birds or churches, all meaningless because they have no connection to each other. Nothing I saw had any connection to anything else I saw, and barely any connection to Evelyn, except that I kept thinking that all this time she was seeing olive trees too, and gold churches, and wondering how with all this beauty she

could have let anything happen, and in case nothing had happened, then how, with all this beauty, could she need or want me?

Then I realized that I hadn't cabled her to say that I was coming. I guess I had such faith in my loyalty to her, knowing that I'd do just anything she asked, I guess I just assumed she'd know I was coming. That she'd know that all she would have to do would be to murmur "Nona" in her sleep, and if I could possibly hear her, I'd come.

And here I am, Evelyn. I'm coming and I hope you know it. I hope you knew from the moment you sent the cable that I'd be right over, just as soon as I could get a plane, for wasn't that what I told you? Didn't I tell you after Maxwell's party that night that if you ever cabled, I'd come, that all there was between us was twelve hours? Well, I know it's been more than twelve hours, but I had to wait for the plane, and I had to be home for one night so I could see my mother . . . my mother . . . and . . . and him, too. So I could see my father. I had to, Evelyn. I had to see them. It wasn't like saying good-by to you. You were dear to me, you were everything to me then and saying good-by to you was like dying, but saying good-by to them was bad, too. I wish you'd understand that. It's not that I love them better than I love you—I'm not like the others, Evelyn, you don't come after a hundred people to me— but it's just that I love them differently. It's just that they're my parents, my father and mother, and I had to see their faces.

It was true. I meant what I was screaming out to Evelyn in my mind. I did have to see their faces. I wanted to look at my mother while I knew that it might be for the last time. I knew it would only hurt more to see how she trusted me

and to know inside myself what I was doing. But maybe I was hoping that the hurt of the situation would do something about making me think twice, for I hadn't really thought about it even once. From the moment I spoke to Ellen, and all the while she was talking, I knew that I was going to go. Anyway, I didn't think I owed Evelyn an explanation about why I didn't jump on a plane the first minute after I had read the cable, so I knew I would never say any of this to her but somehow, somewhere I did feel guilty. I did feel that she expected just about everything from me, and even though on the one hand she might be surprised to see me arrive at all, on the other hand I think, deep in the back of her mind, she'd wonder what happened to the other twelve hours. And that's why I was excusing myself to her now, in my thoughts. I wanted her to know I was sorry and that it wasn't that I wasn't thinking of her in the twelve hours, and also that I was mad . . . mad that she'd even expect me to come at all, let alone right away.

XXIX

Telling the cab driver to take me to 56 Via Romana wasn't like it had ever been before telling a cab driver to take me somewhere. The cab was so old-looking, like a Model-T Ford, that I had a strange, terribly real feeling that I was going backwards in time. That it wasn't just a day later since I'd seen my mother (and then I started to cry, thinking about Mother and even about Dad, especially about Dad, thinking about them reading the telegram), but that it was years previous to all that. That whatever I was going through now was something that I had forgotten to remember about my childhood. That I was reliving it because somewhere in my memory it had been wiped out, and that in a minute or two I'd either wake up in my bed at home, or in my bed in Middleton, or wake up out of a fantasy in my Chaucer class at Masefield. Riding in the buggies in Central Park had sometimes made me feel old-fashioned, but that was in a theatrical, dramatic way; I felt as though everyone was looking at me because everyone else was terribly twentieth-century and I was not. But here in Florence, in this old car with a very old driver, it seemed as though everything was old, everything was turned back.

And then he stopped in front of the oldest, dirtiest *pensione* we had yet passed. It was almost as bad as the

place where Steven McKenna lived, but knowing that somewhere inside I'd find Evelyn made it a little better than Steve's place. I don't remember what the cab fare was; it could have been just about anything. I barely knew then how many lire were in a dollar, or how far we had gone, or what the rate should be. But the driver looked honest, and if he wasn't, I think he looked sensitive and kind enough to see that I was terribly frightened, terribly lost in many ways, and that I couldn't bear at that point to be cheated. Somehow I felt that he understood even though I hadn't said a word. Somehow I felt that he was wise and something like Daddy—there was the same forehead and eyes—and that's maybe why I almost started to tell him the whole story. But then he pulled up next to this old filthy *pensione* and I was too stunned to say anything. But I liked him and, since I didn't know what the tip should be, I gave him twice what the fare was. That left very little. Almost nothing.

A poor, fat old lady was sitting on the steps to the *pensione*. So far, nothing was very different. I mean, I knew I hadn't bothered to look around very much, or let myself see what I did look at, but her sitting there was just like all the women sitting on the stoops down in Steve's neighborhood where many of the Italians in New York lived. She looked just the same. Unmistakably Old World, as I would always think when I saw big, fat women with those shapeless cotton dresses and their low-hanging bosoms. They all looked the same to me. Like the picture of his mother that my father kept on his bureau, only she wasn't Italian. Austrian, I think, but from the Old World. That's what everyone said, "Old World." And now, was I in this Old World? Was this the Old World from which everyone once

came? It seemed wrong to me. Something seemed wrong. I had come here, not for a vacation or a trip or a fling, but I think I really came, without quite knowing it, with the feeling that I would stay. But it's an *old world*, and judging from this *pensione* a rotted world, but let me stay a while and see. Let me see just how rotted it is, or isn't.

The woman said that Mrs. McKenna was on the top floor and that she thought that she might be sleeping. It was about five in the afternoon, but the lady said she thought Evelyn might be sleeping. I started walking up. The stairs tilted so terribly that I had to bend over and grip the stairs with my hand, because there wasn't any railing and I couldn't keep my balance. The steps were filthy and smelly and my fingers wanted to recoil from them but they couldn't or I would have fallen. There were five flights of stairs like that, all steep and all filthy.

The door at the top of the stairs was closed. Before I said anything or did anything, I just stood for a minute and looked. Was it here in this stench-filled house, on top of these monstrous stairs, that all those letters she had sent me were written? Was it here that the frail little figure of Evelyn had been living these long weeks? And then for a minute, a very quick minute, I was angry. Was it Evelyn McKenna, whom I had cared for and nursed, for whom I had vacuumed every day so she wouldn't see the dust, for whom I had scoured the bathtub every morning so any dust that was in the air and might have settled in the tub wouldn't dirty her bath water, was it *this* Evelyn McKenna who could bear to live now in such filth? Was it *this* woman for whom I had made such efforts about cleanliness and good food and to whom I brought perfumes and flowers to keep her femi-

nine and pretty, who could now bear to live in this hovel? Was there a side to her that was horrible enough to be able to stand *this*?

Somehow I had never thought about it that way with Maxwell. I mean, it wasn't until much, much later that I ever thought about the rotten, sick side of her that could stand to get so involved with Maxwell. Oh, I'll admit that I had thought about it from the very beginning, but it didn't make me sick for a long, long time, sick the way I felt now looking at the door to her apartment.

I didn't knock. I listened carefully and couldn't hear anything, and so I tried the door. Ever so gently I pushed it and heard nothing. Then it squeaked and suddenly . . . "*Maledetto . . . Vattene, schifosa*" . . . a man's loud, deep voice bellowed. I swung the door shut as fast as my reflexes could work and nailed myself against it, still gripping the knob.

What was wrong? Was it the wrong door? The woman had said the top floor. This was the top floor. There weren't any other steps. I thought about going down to the next floor and seeing what was there. Then I remembered that nobody seemed to be living on the first floor—all that was there was rotten, smelly garbage—and since nobody lived on the first floor, and "the first floor" really meant the *second* floor, maybe the top floor wasn't the top floor either. But when I looked at the stairs I'd have to go down to see if this were so, I realized how stupid it was and decided that this was the right floor and this was her door.

I would have sat down on the top floor and waited, but since I only had that one skirt and that one blouse I didn't want to get them filthy, so I stood. I desperately wanted

fresh air. All I could think of was fresh air. I waited. Sometimes I'd hear a groan from behind the door and I wondered. But still I waited. I waited until the smell was too bad to take and until I couldn't stand any more. I waited until I almost felt like crying out of sheer rage. Goddamn it, Evelyn, I don't know what's wrong but I've come all the way from New York, you cabled me and I'm here, and Jesus Christ, I'm not going to stand in this lousy hall waiting for you to finish copulating.

God, what a strange word for me to think of. So, well, so almost eloquent if I really thought that the man in there was sleeping with her. Such a nice, refined word to use if I had to picture some big, brawny, hairy Italian lying on top of Evelyn. I couldn't imagine what had made me think of that word, unless it was my desperate hope, my desperate faith that she had once written to me about, in which I believed, or wanted to believe, that she was fine, and refined, and sensitive at least to the point where she couldn't stand to sleep with him in this nightmarish, ghastly place unless somehow, somewhere, there was a *little l*ove. And she hadn't mentioned him in any letters, and that's what made me think that it wasn't love, and made me think that I wished there would be, and made me think of copulation.

It's just that when I thought of "copulate," I thought of a dictionary I had, a lovely leather-bound dictionary on my beautiful bookcases next to the thesaurus on one side and Bartlett on the other. It's just that "copulate" was primarily a dictionary word to me and not an act, and I'd rather think of a dictionary word just now that really had no visual associations while I stood there wondering about Evelyn.

There was enough horror to see in the halls and stairs without picturing anything worse going on behind the door.

And then I did scream out of sheer rage. Not really scream . . . but I called desperately and hopefully into the door, "Evelyn! Evelyn!" And then there was a great scampering around in there and through the crack under the door I saw the sudden appearance and then disappearance of light as if somewhere in the room a door had been opened or a window. And then shortly she came out, opened the door while she was still wrapping a robe about her and stood for a moment, staring, a little happy, a little frightened, but mostly a little shocked. And then she held out her hands with her head cocked a little in that I-don't-want-you-to-help-me-Nona-I'm-fine way, the way that also said but-I'm-in-a-mess-Nona-please-please-help. And she held both my hands, and made me kiss her cheek.

She wasn't the same person I had seen off on the ship. She was so all-of-a-sudden superior, and then she turned and led me into the room, and then I saw just how drunk she was. That feline stride was still there, but instead of the feet going where they were supposed to go, the right one went over to the left and the left one over to the right, and then they collided and she stumbled right onto the bed.

The room was a big, once-white stucco with a window on the ceiling and a door that looked out and into a garden of trees and rocks below. Evelyn sat on the bed. I thought she was going to talk. I waited, but suddenly I saw her raising a wine bottle to her mouth. Then I thought, as soon as she swallows the wine in her mouth she'll say something wonderful. But then . . . then she took the bottle and threw it

across the room, not in my direction exactly, but not too far away. . . . "What the hell did you have to come for? Everything was going just swimmingly. What are *you* here for?"

I couldn't believe what she had said. I didn't want to hear it, either, so I walked over to the door that looked out over the garden and I looked down . . . but I couldn't see the garden. It was like looking into one of those crazy mirrors at Coney Island where everything is either ten times longer than it should be, or wider or something. My tears were so thick that the garden looked as if it were being reflected by one of each of those mirrors, and the picture was so distorted that it hurt my eyes, so I closed them. All I could think of was the rotting I had just seen . . . the rotting garbage on the first floor, the rotting old *pensione,* and now the distortion of the rotting garden, rotting for probably five hundred years. And then I felt the tears going back into my head and I opened my eyes and then all I could see was Evelyn rotting, so the tears came back and I had to close them again.

Without thinking I found I was kneeling on the filthy floor, my head in her lap. . . . "Evelyn, I was so worried when I got the cable. You said you were dying, you said you wanted me, and I'm here. I've come, Evelyn. I told you I'd come if you cabled, and I came."

"Nona, darling, I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry. Do you forgive me, do you?" I nodded frantically and kissed her as if to say "Of course I forgive you," although really, I honestly didn't know for what she was asking to be forgiven. Then I knew. . . .

"Nona, oh, Nona, I'm so disgusted with myself. I'm just a good-for-nothing alcoholic. Your father is right. That's all I am."

"Evelyn, you're not! You're not! I love you!"

"I'm nothing but an old, haggard sot. Look at me, Nona! Look what I've done with myself! I thought at first I could keep it from you. After I'd sent the cable I was so sorry, so ashamed, to think that I had suggested your pulling up stakes and coming to live with me . . . when I don't know where I'll be or what I'll be doing from one minute to the next. And then when you opened the door I realized what I'd done. I remembered the cable, but Sergio was here and I wanted it to be good for him, so I didn't want to tell him just then and I thought maybe if I let him take me along with him in his passion, that when we came out of it I'd find that it had all been a bad dream . . . that I hadn't cabled you and that you hadn't come. But I knew you were there and Sergio knew something was wrong . . . that's why he screamed so at you. But then I heard you call 'Evelyn' and I knew, I really knew, and I asked Sergio to leave through the back roof stairs. Oh, Nona, I *have* to, don't you see? He's the only thing that saves me."

"Of course, I understand, Evelyn. . . . I understand."

"I hadn't wanted to, Nona, you know that. I hadn't wanted to start drinking again, but the book was getting so hard, so impossible, and I was beginning to think I couldn't write, and then the only part of the day that I enjoyed was the part I spent with Sergio. I used to tell myself that the reason I started drinking again was because there isn't any good water and there's only wine. So I had to get off the tablets so I could wash all that spaghetti down. But that's not really why. . . . Oh, Nona, I don't know myself! That's the whole trouble . . . I just don't know. I didn't want to. I thought that had been my last session with drinking. You

had been so wonderful, and I had all those pills with me . . . but I couldn't stand it. It's just that I got so frustrated with putting pages in the typewriter and ripping them out and putting more pages in and ripping them out again and again, over and over, day after day with nothing really getting accomplished, that I got to depending too much on going down to the corner bar for a drink, when I was simply furious with the inadequacy of my mind. All I could think of was my horrible incompetence at writing. . . ."

"Oh, Evelyn, you're so brilliant, you know that. You know you're a great writer."

"I've been too fuzzy-brained, darling. I haven't been writing well at all. And the other night was just the end. I was with some Spanish actors and all I could think about was my writing, and yet I had to give this gay give-and-take with them, and then after dinner they wanted to go to bed with me and I didn't have the slightest interest in that sort of thing, so I left them and just walked and walked until I didn't know where I was any more. And the only thing I knew was the bar . . . so I stayed there until I didn't have any more money. And then I couldn't walk, so I slept on the street and I lay there through the night, sleepless, all nerved up, my mouth dry and sticky, like a vulture's nest, wondering how the hell and why the hell I was there and what in God's name is the matter with me that I should be in such a place. Well, all I could do was last it through."

"Oh, Evelyn, Evelyn."

"I watched the stars, thinking they would never fade and that dawn would never come. And all I could think of was my mouth and how marvelous it would be to bite a tangerine. I just kept thinking of tangerines all night. It was an

insufferable night, but then I kept telling myself that I had gone through worse. The worst thing about this was that it wasn't just ugly in the extreme physical dirtiness and all that, but that I didn't understand how I could be there, that it was all my own idiotic craziness, and it's not fun to feel that you're crazy. Anyway, at last the stars faded and I could get up and walk. Then I was in a big, smelly market area and the first thing I saw was a wagonful of tangerines, and I bought a huge bagful . . . I still had a few lire and started instantly peeling them and eating them like mad as I walked back. And then, then, darling, I cabled you."

"And I came, Evelyn, I came, and everything's going to be fine now. Do you have any money left?"

"No, darling, that's one of the things I thought you'd be able to help me with."

"What about Sergio?"

"He's a dear, but he hasn't got any money."

"Well, I don't either, Evelyn. Oh, don't worry or anything . . . it's nothing to worry about . . . I'll get some. It's just that I don't have any just now."

She looked green. Disgusted. And although I knew that she loved me, especially from the way she had looked at me while she had been talking, I think she felt that my coming was useless. But I was going to prove to her that she was wrong. It wasn't useless. I'd get her money. "Evelyn, first thing tomorrow I'll get a job, and I'll work and give you all the money you need. And as soon as we have enough, we'll get you out of this horrible place. And you won't have to worry about anything."

"That's sweet, dear, but you can't. You can't get a job.

They don't even have enough jobs for the Italians. They never employ Americans."

And then I was scared, but just for a minute. "Well, I'll find one. I really will, Evelyn. Just don't worry about anything." And we finished some cheese she had and a little wine and then she gave me a blanket and I took off my skirt and blouse and laid them carefully on the warped table and curled up under the blanket on the floor and she got into the bed, and soon she was asleep.

That left the room quiet and still for me to think. Italian men are handsome and strong. I'll just close my eyes and not think about it and let it happen, and earn some money. It would be the way it was with Fairfax; I could have been reading a book then. So it really hadn't affected me at all. Now if I could find one that would pay me . . . but what if he said he'd pay me and then afterwards didn't. What if they don't use those things here and I get into trouble. Everybody's Catholic here and Catholics don't use them, so he probably won't have one. Oh, God . . . but nothing will happen. . . . And then I fell asleep and dreamed that I was saying good-by to Evelyn at the ship, and just as it was my turn to kiss her good-by, an enormous yellow wave of water rose and carried me about a hundred feet from her, and when the water subsided and I was standing again, I could see her on the ship with Sergio and they were laughing.

The morning was bright and cool and I left Evelyn writing and bought her some fruit and bread. It was all I could get and still have a few lire left in my purse to do the same with for another day or two. I started walking, stopping in every shop, every market, asking if they needed help . . . and after everyone said, "*Niente, no, no, niente,*" I stopped

thinking about prostitution. I really don't know why, but for some reason I just stopped thinking about it. All I could picture was the rotted courtyard outside Evelyn's room with the cracked, dirty, yellow marble, and I stopped thinking about prostitution. I guess the marble, yellow and old, was tomb-like. But I don't know what it had to do with my not thinking about prostitution. Instead of thinking about prostitution I suddenly began to think of tombs and cemeteries, and then I started to run. I saw an enormously tall policeman who was directing traffic as if he were doing ballet. I stopped running and watched him for a moment. And then I thought, anyone who could make such an art out of directing traffic must have a soul, must understand. So I went over to him and tried . . . "*Debbo parlare con lei,* er, *io,* er, *ho una grande problema . . .*"

And he smiled, saying, "*Inglese?*"

And I almost laughed. If I could have I certainly would have, because it was funny. But I couldn't. I could barely smile. And I told him in English, I told him everything I could to make it sound terrible and dangerous and desperate, and he said he didn't know of anything I could do. And I glanced at my watch to see what Evelyn could be doing now . . . *my watch.* And I begged him, begged him to buy my watch. But he had one. "But your wife, maybe she would like it. Look, it's got a second hand, and a nylon band, and. . . ." How much, he wanted to know. I didn't know what to say. I thought if I asked for too much he wouldn't give me anything. But if I asked for too little, how stupid I'd feel later. Then I thought of Evelyn sleeping on the street, and the yellow, cracked marble in the courtyard, and Sergio escaping through the window, and I said,

"eighteen thousand lire." I guess there was something about the way he had looked at it, the way a kid looks at electric trains at Christmas time, ashamed to show interest in something so fabulous but wanting it so badly, that made me say it, but I did. Everything had been all wrong for so long that I absolutely didn't hear him say "All right." It didn't really sound like "All right" anyway, because of his accent, but since I was expecting to hear a "No," or a number lower than eighteen thousand, I didn't hear him say "All right." I only saw him take out the money and hold out his hand. . . .

I ran so fast that I got lost. I thought I had walked so carefully that I'd surely be able to find Evelyn's place with no trouble, but I got lost anyway. I was too happy to care. I'd take her out for a wonderful meat dinner tonight, and we'd buy a book or something. A new dress for her, perhaps. And I saw a record shop, a marvelous place with opera recordings in the window. And there was a recording by Licia Albanese, to me the greatest soprano that ever lived, and I ran in to see it. Her voice, as no other, always lifted me completely away from everything, sweeping me to ineffable heights of elation—and there was a certain spirituality about her, a certain serenity and beauty that soothed and comforted—and I would have loved so much to be able to hear her now, especially since I was in Florence . . . now. It was an Italian recording that wasn't available in America at all, with arias that weren't on any of her American records. And such a beautiful picture of her on the jacket! I'd take it home and . . . no, no, of course not. This was Evelyn's money. This had to go toward getting her well and giving her food and . . . Licia Albanese would understand. I mean it wasn't that I didn't think her voice superb and that I didn't want to own

every recording she had ever made. I did . . . but this one would have to wait. I'd send for it, maybe. That's right. I could send for it. But now the money belonged to Evelyn. . . .

I ran, not knowing exactly where I was running, but I just ran because I was too excited to walk. And my throat started to get terribly dry from the running . . . and I saw an ice cream shop. Oh, I wanted a cone so badly. It wasn't that I didn't realize that it was her money now, but I needed something moist and I couldn't get water, and maybe if I had an ice cream cone I wouldn't have to eat later and could save the dinner money and then Evelyn would have that much more. Anyway, the name of the shop was Perchè No, so, why not? And they had about fifty flavors of marvelous ices to choose from, and it made me feel a little American again—Italian ices were really more American to me than Italian anyway—so I bought a brown one. The first brown ice I had ever tasted that wasn't chocolate. I didn't know what it was, so I walked along the Lungarno wondering what it was, and thinking how happy Evelyn would be when I'd give her the money . . . and then I saw the street that led to the street near Evelyn, and I ran even faster.

The room was empty. Her clothes were gone. There were a couple of boxes with things in them and her typewriter piled up in the corner. The door was open and she was nowhere to be found. I ran down the filthy, slimy stairs, as fast as one could run on them without breaking one's neck, and that Old World lady was sitting outside again, so I asked her where Evelyn had gone. She only spoke Italian, so it took a little longer. Evelyn must have told her not to tell anyone, but I begged her, I pleaded, I cried, and then, then

I offered her some lire and she told me. She told me in Italian and I had to ask "What?" after every word but I got it. Sergio was coming to pick up the things she had left upstairs and she . . . well, the lady said . . . she thought that she had just gone away for a while. She said *la signora* had said she was going away for a while.

"Where? Where did she say?"

The old woman didn't know except that *la signora* had said it would be for a few days. She seemed to think *la signora* didn't have any money with her. She seemed to think that.

Nothing had ever been as *finite* as that. Nothing had ever had the shock, the this-is-the-end feeling, like this. If I had known Florence, if I had known where to look, I wouldn't have felt so helpless. Or if I had known some people that she knew, people to whom she might go. But I didn't know any place or any people.

I spent the night in her room, watching the stars that didn't fade, feeling a little like Evelyn's story, wondering why I was here and what was my mother doing. Wondering what it was going to be like going back . . . and when I would go back. And then getting angry with myself for thinking of going back, and for not thinking of finding Evelyn . . . and all the while hoping that Sergio would come in to get Evelyn's things.

I had no idea of the time. There was no clock. I had no watch. I didn't yet know how to read the Italian sky as I had been able to do in Middleton, and I was too many floors up to call to anyone outside. Anyway, everyone was making love now. It was getting late, and that's all that happens in Italy when it gets late, I thought. And I began

getting very angry with Sergio for probably making love to some other woman tonight, just because Evelyn was away.

Suddenly Sergio wasn't the horrible man behind the door any more. I forgot how he had cursed me out and all I could think of when I thought about Sergio was that he knew Evelyn. He was the only person in Florence whom I knew she knew, and the only hope I had of finding her again.

And the sky started to get light and I bathed in the public shower and washed my hair, trying desperately to wash off the night and the idea that Evelyn had run away from me. I had come to save her. She had asked me to, and I had come as soon as I could. I hadn't brought money, but I had some now, and I wanted to give her everything I could, and she had run away. I couldn't understand. I didn't know. I wanted to wash it all off and make myself the *me* that I was the night at the New School, before the cable came. I wanted to make myself *that* me again and forget all this. It wasn't worth it. I mean if I could have helped Evelyn, then the hurt that I had caused Mother wouldn't seem so terrible to me as it did now. Now I had hurt Mother, and practically stabbed my father, and with it all, I hadn't helped Evelyn at all. She hadn't let me. She had run away. But I'd find her, and I would help her, and she'd get well again, and somehow we'd always find money, and then when she was well again, then maybe I'd go home. Maybe I could do it, and maybe they'd forgive me and like me again. Maybe Daddy would give me one of those terrific scoldings that shook me and made me cry and shake and tremble, but that made me know deep inside that he loved me more than anyone else did.

The sun was out. Thank God there was a sun today. I felt like dying. Every minute I felt like dying, but I wasn't dead yet, so I figured I could manage to survive.

The stairs outside creaked, and Sergio came in. He looked startled to see me and stared at me without saying anything. I didn't say anything either for a while, but that was only because I had so much to say, and didn't think he spoke English. He did, but almost worse than I spoke Italian, so we took turns. A little English for me, a little Italian for him.

"Where is she? *Dov'è lei?*"

"*Non posso dirglieti.*"

"*Per favore, per favore,* please, Sergio, I must know."

And on and on with these short, half-English, half-Italian sentences that each had one verb, one subject, almost no adjectives, and always in the present tense. Then we began to have trouble because the talk got more complicated. Sergio finally told me everything, and after much struggling and many repeats I got it. I understood.

Evelyn had gone to a flophouse for the night, or nights, or however long it would be until I'd go back. She wanted me to go back home. "But, Sergio, I can't. I haven't a cent." But Evelyn had told Sergio that the American Consulate lends money to American citizens when they need it to get home. "But why, why, Sergio? She asked me to come. I can help her, she wanted me. What happened?"

"She's doing it for you," he said. "She feels it's hopeless."

She told him she'd get out of it just as she'd gotten out of it for all the fifty-seven years I hadn't known her. He said that she had made him swear that he wouldn't tell me where she was staying.

I explained to Sergio about the watch, and I gave him the money. I knew he'd spend it on her, and give it to her when she'd be able to handle it wisely. And I begged him to let me see her. Finally he said yes, he would tell me where she was so I could say good-by, if I promised, absolutely promised, to go straight to the Consulate afterwards and leave. Just see her, not stay long and then leave.

It wasn't that I particularly wanted to stay on in that loathsome way of life or that I honestly felt I could help her. I knew I couldn't. I only knew I wanted to, because it would be easier than going back home and back to my father, and to school.

"All right, Sergio, all right."

He gave me the address. It was just farther down on Via Romana. Walking down the street I didn't notice anything. I didn't care about the whistles this time or the boys that were following me. I didn't see them. They didn't matter. I wasn't flattered by them as I had been the first day. And then I got there. It was 268 Via Romana. Ever since "56" the houses had been getting progressively worse, and I honestly wouldn't have thought that anyone could live in this building, but Sergio had given me the number, and I knew she was in it.

"*Numero quattro due*," the man had said. The stairs were the same as they had been in "56," and I remember the horror I felt at all the smells and filth, the first time I'd climbed them. I remember how I thought that 56 Via Romana was the worst place I'd ever seen in my life. But it actually wasn't. Now I knew what it must be like to live in a hell on earth. I couldn't make myself believe that Evelyn had walked up these stairs. It wasn't that it was hard to believe, it was just that it was impossible to be-

lieve. She was getting into deeper and deeper hells, and this was the deepest I could imagine.

"But number forty-two is the bathroom," I said to the man who had come up with me. Yes, he knew, but it was the only room they had had empty.

"There she is," he said. "I'll wait for you downstairs."

The bathroom was a cubicle just big enough for a bed they'd shoved into it, a decayed green iron bed. It didn't look like a bathroom except that it had said *gabinetto* on the door. And then I saw the *gabinetto*. It was a putrid, tiled floor with a hole in the middle, apparently for both men and women to stand and squat over, all full of turds. And Evelyn McKenna was sprawled across the floor, very close to the hole, passed out. I looked at her closely . . . the wrinkles were deeper than before, the mouth tighter. The eyes looked deeper set and the hands flaccid. I gagged. I put her arms over my shoulder and put my arms around her legs, and got her up, over the hole, and put her on the bed. Her handkerchief fell into the hole in the floor. The white handkerchief which had been one of my going-away presents to her. She wouldn't wake up. It was just as well. I put her flat on her back and combed her hair so that it was off her face, so that it would look as she would have wanted it to look . . . really, though, so that it would look the way I wanted *my* last picture of Evelyn to look. Her lips quivered as though she were speaking. I thought of doing many things. I would have liked to have sprayed a little perfume on her, or to have given her a clean handkerchief, or . . . well, to have kissed her. But I wasn't able to touch her again after I got her on the bed. There was something horrible about her body. It was like a corpse. It was so much like a corpse that it really wasn't

like Evelyn Gordon McKenna at all, and I had a feeling that since I had loved Evelyn so much, to love and cater to this corpselike figure would almost have been like deceiving Evelyn. It seemed crazy, I knew it, but I felt that way, and I twisted my handkerchief and pulled on it and bit it as I realized that I actually wanted to get out of there and leave her. I felt first, though, that I'd have to apologize to her, and I started thinking of what I would say, but she was practically dead, I remembered, and wouldn't hear anything. I gagged again; I mean I retched and nearly choked. Partly from the smells but mostly from the torrents of tears that were pouring down my cheeks and into my mouth. The room smelled so terrible that I think the smell was enough to knock Evelyn out. Her dirty, oily hair and very soiled green tunic dress were the last things about her that I saw before I blindly tore out of the room and made it carefully down the stairs. All the way down the stairs my eyes were on the door and the light. I wanted to get to the light, to see it and have the warm sun beat down on my face. I wanted to speak English to someone. I wanted to go to school. I wanted to go back upstairs for a second . . . no, I didn't. I didn't want that at all, and I walked faster and skipped a little, and then ran until I got to the Lungarno.

As I walked back along the Lungarno all I saw was the dirtiness of the water. It wasn't like the first time when I hadn't wanted to see how dirty it was and was just thrilled about the excitement of having a river running through a city. Now it was all horror. Now everything in Florence was horror to me, everything except the American Consulate.

There it was. It was the most magnificent building I had yet seen. Maybe it wasn't a Palazzo Vecchio or a Santa Maria del Fiore, but it was to me the most beautiful building in all of Florence. From the Ponte Vecchio I could see the two flags blowing and I ran, all the four long blocks without stopping once, without caring what I was passing or who was in my way. I looked across the Arno to the left bank, and then I turned away quickly. I just didn't want to give myself the chance of glimpsing the Via Romana again. Now I was on the right bank, and I was standing in front of a great, beautiful old reconstructed *palazzo,* and all I wanted to think of was what was going to happen to me inside.

It was just like being inside a great American executive office. Suddenly, within minutes, I had stepped home, to America. Even the receptionist was American; in fact, she even looked like Helen. Suddenly I missed Helen and started wondering about my parents, wondering if they had changed much since I had left. But I hadn't really been away that long. I guess according to the calendar it hadn't even been a week. It seemed, oh, so terribly much longer than that. And I longed for the piano, to play the piano, and I couldn't wait for the plane to land, for Mother to kiss me, and for Daddy too. Because now I knew he would. I knew now that he wouldn't have to bother scolding, but that if he did, I wouldn't mind. I almost wanted to hear him shout just then.

The receptionist was very kind. She arranged everything. I was to have an appointment with the man who took care of this sort of thing in fifteen minutes.

It was a very long fifteen minutes, and before I went into his office, I went outside and looked for a last time across the Arno.

I had loved her very much, and I had tried my very hardest. I could never say that I hadn't tried and that I hadn't loved her. I loved her now, too, perhaps more than ever, and I missed her already, almost as if she were dead. But there was an enormous difference between the Evelyn Gordon McKenna in the green tunic dress at that first lecture at Masefield, and the Evelyn Gordon McKenna on the floor of that Florence *gabinetto*, and somewhere, some place in that enormous change in Evelyn there had been a change in me, too, and now, looking out across the Arno, I knew that I had to go home and test my change, to see if it were really there, to see if for once it would stay and work and grow.

This book was set in
Caledonia and Alternate Gothic types by
Harry Sweetman Typesetting Corporation.
It was printed and bound at
the press of The World Publishing Company.
Design is by Ernst Reichl.

(continued from front flap)

In her strange relationship that summer with the famous Irish critic and scholar Evelyn Gordon McKenna, Nona suffers intensely and yet enthusiastically. At college, at orgiastic parties in Greenwich Village, and finally in Italy, Nona cannot tear herself away from this woman who clings to her with the formidable strength of the weak. Nona loves her profoundly and yet there are moments when she hates her too.

To find her identity, Nona gives herself away. With compassion and a rare writing skill, Susan Sherman, the twenty-year-old author of this haunting first novel, creates the story of Nona's struggle with Evelyn Gordon McKenna and, most of all, with herself. This is the subtle and compelling portrait of a child who is striving to become a woman.

JACKET DESIGN BY MILTON GLASER

The World Publishing Company

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SUSAN SHERMAN

2036